
天鏡のアルデラミン
Alderamin on the Sky III
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
III
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
キャラクター原案／口絵&本文イラスト さんば挿
カバーイラスト 竜徹
電撃文庫

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin

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by Uno Bokuto

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「全員死ぬかもしれない。
けれど頼りに
させてもらうよ。
同じ『騎士団』の
仲間としてね……っ！」


Alderamin on the Sky
◇ジャン・アルキネクス
キオカ陸軍少佐。二十一歳。パートナーは光精霊ルナ。軍人として、飛びぬけて優秀な戦略眼を持ち、馬術の腕前も一級品。特異な体質で、睡眠を一切とらない。それゆえ、『不眠(ねむらず)の輝将』と呼ばれる。強敵として、イクタの前に立ちふさがることに……。


◇ミアラ・ギン
キオカ陸軍中尉。二十歳。パートナーは水精霊ヤオ。ハッラー大尉とともにジャン少佐をサポートする軍人。理知的で、常に沈着冷静に振る舞う。腰に差す短刀での近距離戦闘も得意とするが、高所が苦手との噂も。
Alderamin on the Sky


タズニヤド・ハッラー
キオカ陸軍大尉。三十二歳。パートナーは風精霊ノア。ミアラ中尉と二人でジャン少佐をサポートする。風銃兵としても有能で、快活な軍人でもある。ジャンやミアラにとっては面倒見のいい兄貴分。ムードメーカーとしても不可欠な存在。
ミタ・ケンシー
キオカ陸軍曹長。二十二歳。パートナーは風精霊リン。ハッラー大尉の副官をつとめる、頼もしい女性兵士。身体は小さいが、上官のハッラーに対しても臆することなく意見できる強い心臓を持つ。しばしばハッラーの肩に担がれて、ムキーと怒ったりもする。
ムキッ


◇アクガルパ・サ・ドメイシャ
ラ・サイア・アルデラミン人で、アルデラ神軍大将。五十二歳。パートナーは火精霊ゴア。イクタたちカトヴァーナ軍を追撃するアルデラ神軍を率いる、器の大きい豪快な軍人。客将のジャン少佐を「若造」と呼び捨てる。
◇ニルヴァ・ギン
キオカ陸軍秘密工作部隊「カラ・カルム」隊長。二十六歳。パートナーは風精霊ロア。特殊部隊を率いるだけあり、戦闘のエキスパート。任務にストイックで冷酷な兵士でもある。武人としての強烈なプライドを持ち、イクタやヤトリをつけ狙う。


ガガルカサカン大森林
カトヴァーナ帝国
周辺地図
大アラファトラ山脈
シナーク族居住圏
北域
北域鎮台第一基地
カトヴァーナ帝国
キオカ共和国
帝都バンハタール
ターバイ山脈
帝国軍中央基地
南ウルト森林地帯
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Designed by AFTERGLOW

Prologue

Once a year, the sounds of fiddles and drums suffused the Grand Arfatra Mountains in festive cheer.

Shortly before the appointed hour, the Shinaak tribe would split into two groups and accomplish their respective tasks. The youths would descend from the mountain in groups to “pray” at the temple; the elders and children would prepare the delicacies for this auspicious day and await their return.

Once the youths finished their prayers and returned to the village with their spirit companions, the long anticipated Spirit Thanksgiving would commence at dusk. Accompanied by music and song, the entire tribe would throw themselves into the festivities with a gusto. A people normally given to frugality and survived on a small serving of corn starch that could fill the tiniest of containers each day, today was the only day they were allowed to open the storage sheds and celebrate to their heart’s content.

The Shinaak tribesmen prepared places of honor for the spirits, for they were the true centerpieces of this festival. In addition, the Thanksgiving Dance was presented to those who sat upon these honored daises with heartfelt appreciation, a dance that would be conducted by the dancers for three days and three nights.

As for the aforementioned spirits, while they did possess the freedom to move as they will, they instead chose to sit quietly upon their honored daises and accept these heartfelt feelings. –Perhaps they did this because they accurately understood this feeling called “gratitude”? At least, that was the assessment of Anarai Khan from the perspective of a leisurely outsider.

However, it was an adult’s prerogative to enjoy this sort of festival in its entirety, as the children had no place in it after the banquet at sundown. They who were dispatched home at the anointed hour could only enviously listen to the raucous cheers of celebration while reluctantly retiring to their beds.

“Seriously. How~ wily.”

Disgruntled mutters slipped through pouted lips — the young foreigner who had joined Anarai’s expedition to the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the 8 year old Ikta Solork, was no exception.

Amid the pitch dark room bereft of any light, Ikta was covered in a blanket as he lay alone on a stiff bed. The time to undergo a spirit contract was determined by his parents’ discretion, so he was currently without a spirit companion. Even if he had a spirit companion, his counterpart was probably adopting the Shinaak custom and obediently observing the Thanksgiving Dance from its exalted seat.

Ikta really didn’t want to sleep as the corners of his mouth drooped — there was something wrong with Old Man Anarai as well. If he was going to bring up morals like “children should go to bed early”, then he should have forbidden Ikta from joining this expedition in the first place.

Generally speaking, the Grand Arfatra Mountains was not a place for an 8 year old to challenge. By

the time Ikta stepped onto the place that caused him to think “Thank goodness we’re at the top!” and was able to peer into the true peak lurking amidst the clouds above him, he was unable to differentiate whether he was feeling moved or in utter despair.

Fortunately, the village they arrived at was roughly 40% of the way up, but if actually asked to hike the entire way, Ikta may come to reevaluate the science espoused by Anarai to be “the terrifying spirit of child abuse”. No, scratch that, he truly believed that he would probably die in the attempt.

“Given that, what’s with this sort of treatment?”

Ikta continued to verbalize his frustration. The reason why he never complained while participating in such a grueling hike was because of the childish pride he took from “being a member of the expedition”…… Owing to this reason, the youngest “Disciple of Anarai” acknowledged by the professor was highly discontent with the current situation.

“–OK, it’s decided. I’m running away.”

Having made up his mind, Ikta lifted his torso from the bed. While escaping from the room did not mean he had anywhere to go, his mood would surely improve compared to just lurking in the darkness and hoping to snatch a bite somewhere. If fortune favored him, he was also going to try that thing called “wine” that all the adults sought to conceal from him. Given the happiness everyone expressed when enjoying wine, surely it must be delicious–

As he reached out from bed and groped for his shoes, a sudden gust of cold wind swept in from the other side of the room. The ruckus from outside entered a brief crescendo before immediately returning to its original volume.

“–Who is it?”

Comprehending that the door had been opened before swiftly being closed, Ikta asked the darkness as he didn’t believe one of his companions from the expeditionary team had returned. Even in the silence, he could feel the powerful glance the other individual transfixed him with.

The air conveyed clear but gradual movement as the mysterious individual lightly approached Ikta. Just as he was about to warily climb to his feet, his body was tightly clasped by someone from the front.

“Wah!”

Shocked, Ikta reflexively waved his arms and jostled the blinds hanging before the window. For an instant, moonlight penetrated into the dark room. Nonetheless, for eyes that had already grown accustomed to the darkness, that was more than enough light.….

“I am here on a night raid, Ikta!”

The minuscule light within the darkness revealed the luminous smile of a young a girl who had her arms tightly around Ikta, denying him any possible movement.

"……So it's you. You gave me a fright, Nana."

His throat loosening with released tension, Ikta let out a relaxed sigh and called out the other person's name at the same time.

She had chocolate skin burnished by the sun's powerful rays and black hair swept into two short pony tails on each side of the face coupled with a round pair of eyes that evoked the sense of a squirrel's boundless curiosity. Although she was two years older than Ikta, her physical stature that peeked out beneath the short tank top was not vastly different than Ikta's own.

Her name was Nanak. Since the Shinaak tribesmen generally went without a surname, for now she was just plain Nanak. Shortening the name to Nana was a gesture of closeness — though the only outsider bestowed with this privilege was currently befuddled by the actions before his eyes.

"……So, what is a night raid?"

"What, don't you know? OK~ I'll teach you!"

Nanak loosened her embrace behind Ikta's arms and reached out to take hold of his shoulders in order to turn Ikta's body towards her. At close proximity, the two of them faced one another and sat back down onto the bed.

"As for what night raid is — during the eve of the Spirit Thanksgiving Festival, women voluntarily seek out men with a promising future ahead of them and request to share a bed!"

"Oh? That I wasn't aware."

"Ho ho~ Ikta, you might know a lot, but you do not know the most important things!"

Nanak puffed her chest with a proud look on her features, but her opponent, Ikta, had arrived at the conclusion that this was a unique tradition to the Shinaak Tribe. As a disciple of science, curiosity prompted the youngster to inquire about the details.

"So…… What happens after they share a bed?"

"……Huh?"

"Don't tell me that's all there is? Since this was a special request, doesn't anything happen afterwards?"

Faced with an innocent query perfectly befitting a child's logic from Ikta, Nanak began contemplating in an even purer fashion.

"Well…… I guess they go to sleep together?"

"Eh~ How boring. Wouldn't they be unable to do anything after going to sleep?"

"You…… You have a point there…… Then, maybe they talk to one another?"

"That may be so…… But Nana, in short, you also don't know what happens afterwards, right?"

Ikta cut straight into the heart of the matter, causing Nanak to avert her face as she was temporarily at a loss for words.

"That's…… That's not my fault! That's because Father and Mother as well as my grandparents refuse to tell me what happens next! No matter who I go to, everyone says "You're know when you're older" and starts playing dumb!"

"Ho~ ……Refusing to tell children…… Smells like a secret. Specifically choosing the night of the Spirit Thanksgiving that only happens once a year, there must be a reason behind this."

"Yeah, yeah! They also don't allow me to try that thing called wine. Adults really like their secrets!"

"Hm, that is true…… Well then~ If so, let's go outside and give them the shock of their lives–"

Alight with rebellious fire, Ikta was about to rise from bed when Nanak frantically pulled his collar. Owing to this, Ikta fell back onto the bed with a cry of dismay.

"H, hold on a second, Ikta! ……T, That sort of thing, we can do that tomorrow morning!"

"……I say, Nana. What are you thinking?"

"If I knew the answer I wouldn't have to go through all this! ……Still, I think that since the night raid involves coming to the other person's sleeping area, wouldn't this mean that the boy and girl need to be alone?"

"Hm…… I see, you may be onto something."

"R, right? So…… Even if it's for a short while, how about the two of us just chat for a bit? Besides from what we talked about before, were there other old tales from Yaponiku that your mother shared with you?"

"If you like, there are a lot of similar stories. Well, let's see……"

"Ah! Wait a second! Hold on!"

Nanak reached out a hand to halt Ikta just as he was about to speak. Afterwards, she hesitated briefly before looping around to take a seat behind the young man and using her entire body to wrap around Ikta.

Unable to divine the purpose behind such a restrictive action, Ikta opened his mouth to object.

"I say, Nana, this makes it really hard to talk."

"I, isn't this just fine? I can hear you perfectly."

"Forget it, if that's how you feel…… Is there a point behind this posture?"

"Pay no attention to it. Since I have no idea what to do during a night raid, I'm just going to do what I want to."

Hearing this, Ikta chuckled wryly before nodding his head and began rummaging through the drawers of his memory to pick the proper story. Acceding to the young girl's wish to hear a story, it was in this fashion that they continued until the moment the sky began to brighten — becoming an irreplaceable moment in their young lives that became deeply engraved in their memories.

……And who would imagine that this benign history would suddenly reconnect to this nightmarish present?

Here in the Grand Arfatra Mountains again, the young man and young lady who shared that childhood memory were currently facing one another. What was different from the past — was probably everything besides for the location and individuals involved. The young man of present day was a soldier, whereas the young lady stood here as the chieftain of a tribe. After waging war amidst the bloodshed, they now congregated here from the perspectives of the victor and vanquished.

Within the murky tent, Yatori solemnly loosened the bindings that bound Nanak Dar's hands behind her back. Sitting in front of Nanak, Ikta watched her from a distance where merely stretching out one's hand was enough to brush skin.

"……What are you doing? Why are you untying me?"

Realizing she was now a captive of war, Nanak was bewildered by the events that surpassed any of her expectations. Ikta was the one who answered her.

"That's because regardless of how many times we apologize to someone under restraint, the most favorable interpretation would be an altered form of duress."

Now, another wholly unexpected phrase being issued forth another's mouth caused Nanak to wrinkle her brows.

"Apologize……? For what do you who emerged victorious in this conflict need to apologize towards we who were defeated?"

"For the cruelty our side has inflicted upon yours."

Ikta replied back without hesitation. The utter brazenness and hypocrisy of saying such words to the vanquished filled Nanak with immeasurable fury.

"Bullshit……! You will not find a single man among the warriors of the Shinaak Tribe who was not ready to die in battle! If the victors apologize out of self-aggrandizement, such an action would only insult our warriors!"

A hostile glare centered itself on Ikta. Even Yatori, who stood by on the wings but remained in a position to intervene, felt herself echoing Nanak's anger. This pride was universal among all fighters, but……

"True, if this were the cruelties of war or the harsh measures taken on the battlefield, I would not even consider apologizing here."

Ikta clearly shook his head in order to dispel this misunderstanding.

"First, in relation to the fundamental decision of 'whether or not to go to war against the Shinaak Tribe'. This was the decision handed down by high-ranking officers who possessed the right to attend strategy sessions, so there's no way for us to take responsibility even if we wanted to. Likewise, the righteousness of this war itself can also be described in the same way."

"…………?"

"Second, in relation to the independent tactical decisions carried out by the lower-ranking officers, myself included. While the primary objective was to pursue the most efficient methods of wiping out your forces — on that point, I don't plan on apologizing either. The reason being that this is the way of war. Although this was not according to my wishes, since I am here in the capacity as a soldier, then I must do my part in securing military objectives. I have no intention of excusing myself in that regard."

Not that I plan on taking pride in that either…… Ikta snidely inserted that line before diving into the main topic.

"That being said, now I speak of the rampage conducted by the soldiers under the direct command of us lower-ranking officers on the front lines — the unnecessary atrocities and slaughter carried out against noncombatants. In regards to this heinous behavior, I must offer my sincere condolences. That is because this event has transcended acceptable military boundaries and, in another manner of speaking, was the result of our inability to rein in our forces."

Once Ikta finished speaking these words, he used his eyes to signal Yatori. The fiery-haired young woman sighed before pulling out the dagger from the right side of her waist and handed the weapon along with the stool carried beneath her right arm to Ikta.

"I am not so arrogant as to beg your forgiveness here and now, seeing as the dead would not come back to life just because I apologized."

He placed the stool on the ground as he said this. Innumerous scars and indentations dotted the surface of this tool showed its frequent use for repair work.

"'My condolences', 'sorry', or 'my sincere apologies' — these short phrases do not possess the power to erase human transgression. So then, what is an act of contrition? What does it signify? …… In my youth, there was a time when I deeply considered this question."

With the palm facing upwards, Ikta spread his left hand across the stool's surface.

“There was once a similar story — a long time ago, in an era before the wind musket, nay, before even the crossbow had been invented, there lived a hunter on the Great Arfatra Mountains. His skill with the bow was so incredible that he could strike down a deer on the mountain next to the peak he was standing on. Everyone in the mountains was in awe of his talent, and all the animals on the mountain feared him…… However, he grew arrogant due to his ability, until one day he accidentally struck a young village girl who interposed between him and his prey.”

Nanak’s chest tightened as she listened to the young man tell his story, but she was not able to immediately identify that this was nostalgia.

“Faced with the young girl who fell due with a serious wound, the hunter deeply regretted his pride. He offered vast amounts of goods and gifts as well as spoke the most contrite phrases of apology, but the father of the young girl refused them all and said: ‘No matter how much is prepared, gifts are only objects; no matter how many words you say, they are only restricted to your tongue. Where is the most important thing, your sincerity?’ ……Then, he gave a small knife to the hunter.”

As Ikta spun his tale, for some reason his pinky was tightly wrapped in rope. Blood circulation was blocked from the fingertip, causing the finger to become deathly pale.

……Realizing that the circumstances fit tradition perfectly, Nanak’s entire body stiffened.

“The hunter looked upon the knife his hand and arrived at the answer himself — the first duty of the one who erred was to guarantee that he or she would never repeat the same mistake. Only when he was in a position to ensure this guarantee would the path to reparation be open…… It was at this moment the hunter realized what the other side wanted him to do with the knife. With this, he could truly guarantee that he would never repeat the same error.”

The blade emitted a brief flicker as it was placed against the first digit of the little finger as the right hand holding the dagger began applying pressure.

“……Hmph–!”

The cut was not a clean bisection. The blade came to a halt upon reaching bone and the skin was still attached, so until the digit was entirely severed, he had to repeat the motion two more times. Even though the blood loss was greatly reduced due to the preparations before hand, the rope bindings serving as a stand-in for anesthesia could not entirely erase the pain of the cut. The nerves connecting his fingertip to the brain had turned into a highway of pain.

“………… Hrn—-!”

Once the painful peak passed, Ikta was barely able to recover his breath before continuing his narrative.

“……The hunter chopped away the ring and little fingers of his right hand and kept the three fingers that were absolutely vital to pulling a bow. The father of young girl asked, ‘Is this because you are

unable to abandon that?' The hunter shook his head and replied, 'It is true that cutting off those three fingers would render a misfire impossible. Yet, that would also render reparation impossible. A mistake made as a hunter can only be recompensed by a living a correct life of a hunter. Abandoning the bow would the same as fleeing from the error. Thus, I have cut away the two unnecessary fingers that symbolize my pride and shall view the remaining three fingers on my right hand as an eternal warning.' It is said that the determination behind those words convinced the young girl's father and he finally accepted the hunter's will to atone.

Since then, "slicing off fingers" as a method of atonement became a tradition among the Shinaak Tribe — that was the story you told me, Nana."

"……! W, wait a minute, you are……!"

Ikta did not wait for Nanak's memories to recover entirely and placed the dagger's edge along the second digit of his little finger. This there there was also no hesitation. He put his entire weight behind the downward push and even went one step further sawing the edge of the blade back and forth. The sound of his teeth grinding back forth to combat the pain was to the point that the teeth shatter against one another.

"Whew…… Ugh……! ……My thanks to the hunter within that story. If he had cut off his thumb, then I would be facing a situation where I must forfeit my head. That's because my errors as a commander, regardless of the cognitive thought or the physical order, both originated above the neck–"

Ikta took twice the amount of time to remove the second digit compared to the first one. Afterwards, he switched the blade over to the edge of the short stump that was barely a third in length of the finger. The rope serving as anesthesia had long since lost its effect and fresh blood oozed forth from the gory wound onto the stool. Off to a side, Yatori could only watch the proceedings with a dismayed expression.

Though plainly no one ordered him to do so and no one would hold it against him if he faltered halfway, Ikta remained steadfast. After a desperate effort, he practically tore apart apart the last scrap of flesh and bone yet conjoined. Practically at the same moment that the dagger slipped from his right hand, Yatori bound forward and began dressing the wound.

Nanak tore her eyes from the three fleshy bits atop the stool towards the face of the young man who had forever bid farewell to his flesh and asked in a trembling voice.

"……What…… is your name……?"

"I am Warrant Officer Ikta Solork of the Imperial Army…… Many events transpired since we last met, hence why I bear a different surname than before."

The young man even wore a grin as he volunteered his name while large tear drops fell from Nanak's eyes.

"……You…… are Ikta……? Truly…… that……?"

“Yep…... Long time no see, Nana. Although this is entirely the wrong time, you’ve became really beautiful.”

The instant those words registered into her hearing, Nanak immediately pulled her gaze away from the young man’s for, lowering her head in a desperate effort to control some emotion threatening to burst forth. Although Ikta shared her sentiments entirely, he kept his gaze steady.

“…...Yatori, you don’t have to keep bandaging me. Return these to her.”

“Understood.”

After finishing treatment, Yatori rose and removed a small bundle containing a tiny rectangular object from her uniform.

“Here, with our compliments.”

Nanak wore a confused expression as she accepted the object Yatori offered her and tentatively unwrapped the bundle. However, she held her breath when her eyes ran over the black rectangular shape within.

“This…... this wouldn’t be…...”

“This is your companion, the soulstone of the spirit Sya. After the previous engagement, we were fortunate enough to successfully recover this.”

When she heard those words, Nanak let out a choked sob as she pressed her forehead to the soulstone. Her lost other half had returned — that sublime belief sent a shiver through her entire body.

“Nana, in return for the three severed digits, I hope you can accept these three one-sided proposals from our side.”

Currently, she did not possess the leisure to formulate an answer. Ikta pressed onward fully aware of the wretchedness of his actions.

“The first condition was mentioned earlier, as we request your acceptance regarding the travesties conducted by our forces. The second condition is that we hope the Shinaak Tribe can provide assistance in defending against the Holy Aldera Army invading from the north.”

“…………What!”

Her duties as a chieftain forced the distressed Nanak to raise her head. In order to show her actions the proper respect, Ikta also began negotiating from the stance of a Warrant Officer of the Imperial Army.

“Ra Sai Alderamin dispatching troops at this juncture…... I’m sure you are aware of the significance of this act? Those guys are looking to press the advantage with the Northern Garrison and the Shinaak Tribe exhausted from their protracted struggle. Strictly speaking, the Holy Aldera Army is also a

pawn in the game, with the true instigator being the Kioka Republic. Just as the ones who taught you all guerrilla tactics also came from Kioka."

"W, what……! You mean those guys from Alderamin are coming over God's Stairway to invade the Empire……?"

"I too would be skeptical had I not witnessed it with my own eyes, so I can only say we all lacked foresight on the matter…… However, you do understand the situation, correct? Those guys are here to annihilate us. In the name of "saving spirits", they seek to shatter the Shinaak Tribe and the Northern Garrison at the same time."

Within that steely assessment, Ikta seamlessly included his own analysis. Exactly how the Holy Aldera Army would treat the Shinaak Tribe was dependent on the enemy's strategic objectives. If this young man was fighting for the other side, he would first seek an alliance with the Shinaak Tribe to establish a working relationship and inciting them to continue resistance efforts against the Northern Garrison. This increased the number of potential allies while exhausting their respective fighting strength and was likely the most efficient approach.

Nevertheless, it was Ikta's hypothesis that there was less than a 50% chance the enemy would adopt this strategy. Ra Sai Alderamin was a deeply religious and highly orthodox country. Based on that quality, even if they were only strategic allies of convenience, it was highly doubtful that they would show leniency towards the heretical Shinaak Tribe.

……That being said, given that they had allied with the Kioka Republic, a country founded on technological advancement that gradually ran counter to Aldera dogma, this preconception could also be overturned. Precisely because of this, Ikta absolutely needed to fully utilize his personal relationship with Nanak Dar and strike first.

"If you are willing to assist our forces against the Holy Aldera Army, I can guarantee the position of the Shinaak Tribe in the Empire afterwards. It is inevitable that the Grand Arfatra Mountains will be conquered by the Holy Aldera Army, so our side will provide another area for settlement. Given that the Empire has more land than it knows what do with, there will be no problem finding somewhere that meets all the criteria."

"……Is this your personal proposal? Or……"

"This is of course the united consensus of the Northern Garrison and we have also obtained approval from the commanding officer, Lieutenant General Safida. So long as I am alive, this covenant will not be overturned. Additionally, another authority can also provide support for this."

Besides for his position as an "Imperial Knight", the current Ikta could also call upon his connection with Princess Chamille. Deftly employed, these assets should be able to give him enough clout even when haggling with the country itself…… The caveat was that the perquisite involved him surviving the crisis before him.

"I am afraid there's no time for you to deliberate. Please make your decision, Chief of the Shinaak

Tribe.”

Ikta pressed Nanak for an answer. Being forced into a major decision, Nanak wracked her brain for a moment before asking a question of her own.

“……Wasn’t there one more?”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you slice the little finger into three parts? Thus far I have only heard of two ‘one-sided proposals’.”

“Oh……”

That was a shrewd observation. Using his unblemished right hand to scratch his scalp, Ikta let out a wry chuckle.

“This is probably the most important one too. If possible, I would like to continue calling you Nana in the future.”

Nanak’s sense of time ground to a halt. Even Yatori observing the negotiations to one side pressed a hand to her forehead with an expression of disbelief on her face.

“……You…… Don’t tell me…… Just for that, you increased the number of things that needed to be taken care of from two to three……?”

“The first and the second were actions demanded of me as a soldier, whereas the third was atonement as a friend…… In all honesty, even though this is tradition, I really didn’t want to give such a bloody gift to a lady.”

The young man said this as he lowered his head to gaze at the severed parts of his own body. Nanak could only sigh at that.

“……If only you had become an insufferable person, I wouldn’t have to trouble myself over all this. …..”

“Really? It was precisely because you became such a wonderful lady, that I could cut off my little finger without an ounce of hesitation.”

The wry smile that came after those words coincided perfectly with the expression in her memory, serving as the final motivator to bolster Nanak’s decision.

“……I understand. Then I, Nanak Dar, accept your three one-sided proposals on behalf of the Shinaak Tribe.”

“……My word, you do know that the finger you cut off will never grow back, correct?”

Three thousand meters above the ground, the mountains sat beneath a sky so blue it veritably gave men the chills. Immediately after leaving the tent, the fiery-haired young woman sidled along Ikta and began lecturing him in an irate tone as they paced ahead.

“Huh……! H, how can that be! Why did you warn me ahead of time!?”

“Oh my, my apologies for not being thoughtful enough. And here I thought that ‘Anarai’s Box’ had some sort of all-purpose adhesive that could reconnect parts of the human body.”

Hearing the young man feign madness even at this time, Yatori averted her gaze as though she clearly had enough. Realizing that his joke had gone too far, Ikta switched gears and verbalized his real thoughts.

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing. Just like the Kioka Incident, every time I borrow your dagger I swing the blade at something outrageous.”

“In truth, compared to severing a comrade’s finger, cleaning frogs is infinitely preferable…… However, that’s not the question at hand. The point is why did you need to take things so far in the first place?”

Highly distressed, Yatori turned her eyes onto the left hand that was short a finger, to which Ikta chuckled wryly and shook his head.

“My hand was forced. Nana is a smart girl, but right now we don’t have the time to persuade her with logic. Since we are requesting assistance from opponents who were still hostile to us yesterday, in order for them to accept our one-sided conditions, a performance capable of resonating with Shinaak aesthetic ideal was absolutely necessary.”

“I am referring to how odd it is for you to take full responsibility for everything. The rampaging allied unit was not under your command, so wouldn’t logic require the commanding officer on site bear the responsibility instead?”

“What you say makes sense, but having ‘me’ make the apology just now does have its own significance. Rather, negotiating with Nana would only succeed going through me, so the situation naturally developed this way.”

While she could rationalize the young man’s explanation, Yatori still wore an expression that signified she found this difficult to stomach. That was because she was unable to bear the thought of her comrade being sacrificed while she herself got away unharmed.



Since this was an unavoidable wound, then she should be the to bear the burden — that was Yatori's pride as a knight. Ikta was perfectly aware of this aspect of Yatori's personality, but he still clearly shook his head in the negative.

"My little finger and yours are on entirely different levels of value. Clueless as I am at close quarters combat, even I know that holding a sword starts from the little finger. In our current circumstances, any loss in your fighting ability is a serious detriment. Comparatively, so long as I still have everything above the neck, even losing the little finger would not inconvenience me too badly."

"……Even if that's the case, wouldn't that be a problem in the future?"

"In regards to that, so long as I still have my index and middle fingers, I won't have any problems in bed at least."

Upon hearing her counterpart cracking jokes in his usual irreverent manner, Yatori snorted and curbed her tongue. The two of them happened to arrive at the command tent at this time, only to find that they were beginning to pull camp and only a few familiar officers were in attendance.

"Ah, Ik-kun! How did it go?" "Were the negotiations successful?"

Torway and Matthew hurried over the instant their eyes met. Ikta casually kept his left hand out of sight and smiled without saying a word. Inferring that everything went well based on this attitude, the two of them sighed in relief.

"……Though the future if fraught with peril, being able to call upon the Shinaak Tribe for assistance will be a tremendous help."

“They said that there should be 500 men in two days and 800 after five…... Of course, this is thanks to the popular support Nana has as chieftain, though Captain Sazaruf’s contributions should not be overlooked either. Thankfully, since the village was spared from the torch and the inhabitants gathered together instead of slaughtered, this saved us the hassle of gathering any scattered manpower.”

“Thanks for the compliment. Its absolutely astounding that I would be thanked for engaging in this ridiculous battle.”

How apt? Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Captain Sazaruf approached the group with a RYO cigarette dangling between his lips with Haro trailing a few steps behind him.

Excluding Haro, the other members of the Knights Club formed themselves into a row and saluted their superior officer in unison.

“Hey, now you guys actually look a bit more like soldiers. Practically night and day from the time all of you were on base.”

“If that is the case, I am certain it is all thanks to your tutelage, Captain.”

“Ha, easy on the jokes…... Even if I didn’t offer any guidance, you all would have made it, right? In spite of that, now you have got me here at the short end of the stick.”

Lieutenant Sazaruf expelled a cloud of white smoke filled with self-ridicule and defeatism from his mouth before continuing onward.

“OK, let’s change the topic…... Our esteemed Lieutenant General Safida, the Garrison Commander who was the first to bail on us, has decided to confer an amazing gift upon each of you.”

“If you are referring to one-way tickets to Hell, we’re still puzzling over how to get rid of the tickets we got earlier.”

The captain got a chuckle out of Yatori’s sarcasm that was laced with more than a healthy dosage of spice.

“…...The ones receiving these gifts may view this as real estate from Hell, but at least it does serves a purpose from a practical standpoint. –So, first up are Warrant Officer Ikta, Warrant Officer Yatori.”

“Here, sir!” “Yes, yes, yes…...”

“Field promotions for the two of you. From this point, the two of you are 1st Lieutenants. Congratulations.”

Pah, pah, pah…... Captain Sazaruf clapped in a lackluster manner. At this plainly obvious development, Ikta and Yatori were too lazy to sigh and were even on the cusp of yawning.

“Next up we have Warrant Officers Matthew, Torway, and Haro. From this point, you are all

promoted to 2nd Lieutenants.”

“Oh…...” “Ah…... Yes, sir!” “That was sudden!”

The three of them responded differently, but were united in the sense of depression, causing Captain Sazaruf to sigh.

“What~ You should all be happier! You guys are the first ones to be promoted in your cohort and can crow about it when you get home.”

“Yes, we can crow about it when we get home if we actually make it home.”

As if recalling the despair looming at the back of his mind, Matthew’s tone grew bleaker. Ikta and Yatori thought back to the situation that caused his depressed state — the military conference that had just finished an hour ago.

“–Anyone! Does anyone have a suggestion!?”

Even with Lieutenant General Safida’s hysterical screams, the crowd of staff officers within the tent hunkered down and stayed quiet. During this entire time, the enemy army creeping closer from the north.

The news that the Holy Aldera Army was on approach caused a tremendous shock among the members of the Northern Garrison who had just relaxed from the protracted struggle with the Shinaak Tribe. Everyone from the rank and file to the officers felt the blow, so given the current hour, perhaps their panicked mob mentality was only a matter of course.

“Don’t just sit there, I want to hear suggestions! Do any of you understand the situation? The enemy is at the gates! The foot of the Grand Arfatra Mountains will be right in front of them once they get through the trails of Gagarukasakan Forest!”

In addition, the commander-in-chief responsible for bringing order back into the ranks was in a similar state before their eyes.

“Are we going to withdraw entirely or throw the dice and repel them! Shouldn’t you guys be able to assess a small thing like which one of these offer the high chance of success?!”

Despite Lieutenant General Safida frothing at the mouth in fury, the beauty of it all was that he was not consciously aware of the problem’s focal point. Regardless of whether they were withdrawing or retaliating, both options were bereft of any chance of success. Besides from the Lieutenant General himself, everyone present was aware of that fact, hence why everyone kept their peace.

Based on Torway’s observations and assessment, it would take the Holy Aldera Army just over five days at a minimum to enter the Grand Arfatra Mountains and attack the Imperial Army. In comparison, no matter how they reran the numbers, the Imperial Army needed at least 20 days to fully retreat from the battle zone. A swift comparison between the two numbers clearly showed that simply fleeing would undoubtedly end in enemy attack during the retreat.

As for whether fending off the enemy held a higher chance of success, this was also a desperate gamble. Based on confirmed reports alone, the Holy Aldera Army had mobilized troops northward of 12000. In contrast, the Empire had already been decimated by the internal conflict with the Shinaak Tribe and their original troop count of 18000 was now tragically below 8000.

The enemy was one and a half times their number already, without going into the fact that the Imperial forces were already exhausted by continuous warfare. Taking into consideration that they were also desperately short on supplies, the absolute difference in firepower between the two sides does not bear further mention.

"……Captain, the situation will not improve at this current rate."

"Keep it down. If you want to return alive, do not even think about jumping into the ring and clarifying the situation."

Hearing Yatori's whisper, Captain Sazaruf minutely shook his head. Within the cramped confines of the command tent, chairs were only for high-ranking staff officers while everyone else from captains on down remained on their feet while listening to the meeting progress.

"On that regard, although I do want to agree with your point of view, Captain…… But if this keeps going on, we may get to the point that the meeting adjourns only to find that our forces have been completely surrounded by the enemy."

Ikta said this with a sigh. Under a pincer attack from his two subordinates, Captain Sazaruf scratched his scalp with a gusto.

"……Spare me, guys. You all and I have clearly overworked ourselves up to this point, no? What valid reason do we have to keep drawing the short end of the stick?"

"We are soldiers. I fear that more than constitutes a valid reason."

Yatori's gaze was highly forthright. The captain sought to escape this pressure, but on the other side he had Ikta's pair of pitch black eyes waiting for him. He had no where to run.

"……It's only a matter of sooner or later, isn't it, Captain? If we don't come up with a plan and this turns into the Holy Aldera Army pouring into the north after hiking over the Grand Arfatra Mountains, then all we can do is join in the defense…… No matter how impossible the situation becomes."

"…………"

"I am of the belief that since we still have the opportunity to determine our destiny, intentionally drawing the short straw is still better than having others dictate our future. The point here is that there is a proper time for sloth."

"……You make it sound so easy, but we're up against 12000 men. Do you have a concrete plan in place to handle so many?"

“Yes. Yatori and I just came up with a countermeasure.”

These two officers each pressured their superior from their unique standpoints. As if finally caving in, Captain Sazaruf raised his head to the heavens and held that position for ten seconds as if steeling himself for the plunge.

“You bunch over there! You have been nattering for a while now, do you have something to say!?”

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Lieutenant General Safida vented his spleen on the officers from the lower ranks whose names he didn’t even know. Internally mocking himself for this perfect opening, Captain Sazaruf raised a heavy right hand straight into the air.

“……I do have a suggestion. Based on our current situation, we should leave a detachment as a rearguard in attempt to half the enemy advance.”

A ruckus broke out within the tent. The staff officers that had hitherto remained silent each wore an expression of “this guy actually said it aloud” and all began speaking as if waking from a long dream.

“Hm…… He’s right, that’s the only way.”

“In that case, who should command in the field……?”

“This is a sticky decision, though we also have to consider the unit size……”

Though there were voices in all the chatter, no one seemed to be eager to take on this assignment. Highly put out by the gazes all directed towards him, Captain Sazaruf plowed forward with his explanation nonetheless.

“……The Holy Aldera Army is approximately 12000 in number. The purpose of our retreat is to return to our homebase in the north in order to regroup and meet the enemy, so a corresponding amount of soldiers must make it out. Conservatively speaking, it will take at least a month for Central to marshal enough reinforcements. Therefore, the number of soldiers sufficient to hold out in the north during this time, including the remnants still in the various bases in the area, would probably be just above 6000 men or so……”

Since Captain Sazaruf did not have experience commanding large bodies of troops, he was not entirely confident in this number. However, the fact that not a single staff officer offered any objections served as proof for his assertion.

“In that case, the maximum size of the rearguard would be the 2000 or so men left from the 8000 after removing the 6000 defenders. The next issue would be how to utilize this unit……”

As for the next phase, the captain actually had no idea. At this time, Yatori stepped forward to take on this burden.

“Captain, may I continue explaining?”

“Ah…... Uh…... I’ll leave it to you. –My apologies, my aide will take over now.”

Since a mere Warrant Officer would never be allowed to speak during a strategic conference, Captain Sazaruf intentionally gave Yatori the opening by implying “she was just expressing what I wanted to say”. Even left before the astounded gazes of the staff officers, Yatori mentally thanked the captain for this opening while fearlessly pressing onward.

“First of all, the majority of the rearguard would naturally be deployed along the defensive perimeter on the mountains. When faced with the Holy Aldera Army climbing the mountain range from the north, we will adopt the strategy of erecting fortresses along their march — in other words, we are modifying the tactics the Shinaak Tribe used against us for our own purposes.

Yet, given the well-fortified defenses the Shinaak Tribe erected facing the south, it would be a logical assumption that the defenses facing northward would be considerably weaker because they were never expecting an attack from that direction. While we must adopt field preparations to make up for the deficiencies, with the enemy reaching our position in five days, it is frankly impossible for us to make it in time.”

Here, Yatori took a breath. Already inferring what was going to happen next, Captain Sazaruf softly muttered, “You have got to be kidding.”

“As such, before the defensive battle required to buy time for the entire army to retreat, another defensive stand must be made to obtain the necessary time to fortify. The number allotted to this unit will be whatever is left from the 2000 needed for fortification purposes…... which is around about a company of 600 men. Any less would render the mission impossibly difficult, whereas any more would impact the field preparations on the mountain range.

Lieutenant General Safida read between the lines of Yatori’s words. His eyes widened as he replied back.

“So you mean…... Requesting a mere company of 600 men to hold off an enemy force of 12000 while the field preparations are finished.”

“This is not a request. This is mandatory because we have no other options.”

“…...Since you dare to say that, surely you have a more concrete plan to buy time?”

“We will use fire.”

Yatori did not hesitate with her reply. After accepting the map seamlessly handed to her by Ikta, she unfurled the map so everyone could see.

“As the Lieutenant General said earlier, the trails north of the Grand Arfatra Mountains leads into the Gagarukasakan Forest. Since this sea of trees is wider running east to west, the Holy Aldera Army must pass through this forest or else take a very long detour. Ergo, if our forces set this forest ablaze, we can utilize a wall of fire to halt the enemy army.”

“W, what…… Setting the forest alight……!”

This audacious suggestion shocked the staff officers, even prompting Captain Sazaruf’s jaw to drop.

“This is just enlarging the scale of the fire perimeter duties normally carried by the Incendiary Corps. The Gagarukasakan Forest has not been developed for large troop movement, so there is only one wide road we need to law a fire perimeter across. Furthermore, this is a dry forest bereft of any moisture except during the rainy season, making it the ideal location for a fire attack.”

“This would lead to a wildfire! How can this be controlled with only 600 men –”

“Ah, I will explain the manpower issue. Our insufficient numbers will filled in by petitioning the Shinaak Tribe.”

Ikta’s addition caused all the skeptical gazes from the staff officers to congregate onto him.

“Calling upon the Shinaak Tribe for assistance……? What is this farce? That’s not something that can be done in one day!”

“Actually, that’s not the case, because Chieftain Nanak Dar is among the captives. As long as we can convince them the Holy Aldera Army is our common enemy and guarantee the Shinaak Tribe’s position and rights in the Empire, she doesn’t have any reason not to accept based on her position as chieftain. Once the negotiations are complete, I will allow her to gather men from the village to our rear and instruct her tribesmen not to obstruct the Imperial Army defending against the Holy Aldera Army.”

If placed in a situation where they could be stabbed in the back by the remnants of the Shinaak Tribe, any talk of a defensive position would immediately collapse. Under that context alone, successfully convincing Nanak Dar was an absolutely necessity for this operation.

“Even if you could successfully convince the Shinaak Tribe, can you guarantee that there will be no problems with the fire perimeter throughout the entire forest? It’s impossible to gauge the extent the fire will spread!”

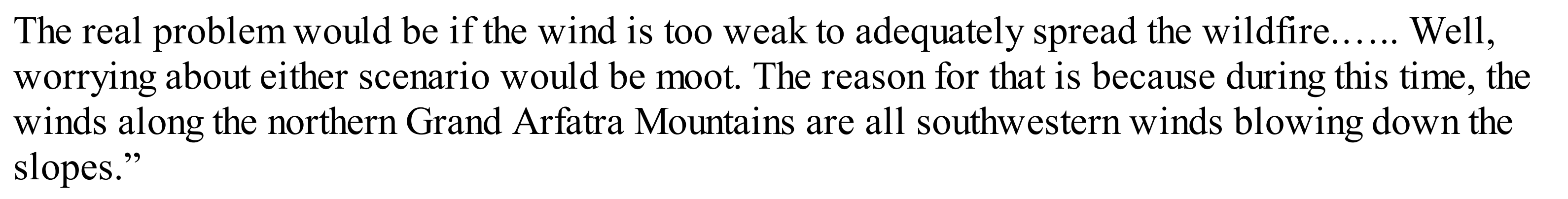
“T, that’s right! Depending on the wind, there is a possibly our forces will be harmed by the flow of the fire. What if it rains in the middle? Wouldn’t that put us back to square one?”

Faced with the horde of blustering officers, Ikta mentally snorted in derision.

“……Such a thing will not come to pass. First, this area is still in the dry season. Though it is nearing the end, there is still at least half a month before we can expect any rain. There is an extremely low probability at our current time frame that we will be hampered by a rainstorm.”

“Uh…… What about the change in wind direction? Winds atop the mountain can be highly unpredictable!”

“Even taking into consideration of impacting other areas, all of this is within expected parameters.


The real problem would be if the wind is too weak to adequately spread the wildfire…… Well, worrying about either scenario would be moot. The reason for that is because during this time, the winds along the northern Grand Arfatra Mountains are all southwestern winds blowing down the slopes.”

“What did you say……? How can you be sure of that?”

“Have you heard of chinook winds before? As its name suggests, this type of wind climbs the mountain on one side and blows down the mountain on the other. So long as a strong gust is blowing on one side of the mountain, wind coming down the other side of the mountain is inevitable…… With the areas in southern and central Katjvarna currently in the rainy season, I am sure everyone here has felt the winds blowing over the mainland from the southwestern seas.”

Next to the young man explaining the situation, Captain Sazaruf made the connection and clapped his hands.

“……That’s it! The fall winds!”

“That’s correct. The winds that bring the rainy season for the mainland will bring that same blessing into the northern region in another month from now…… No, although the rain has not yet come, the wind itself can be felt. The fall winds will climb along the face of the Grand Arfatra Mountains then turn into chinook winds and rush down the northern facing. Based on that phenomenon, the fires we set should even spread out before the approaching enemy.”

Well? Ikta visually inquired. With the tide of resistance ebbing from the staff officers, he wordlessly poked his superior officer in the bank. Reading Ikta’s cue, Captain Sazaruf solemnly began to speak.

“……Since the one who made the proposal should bear the responsibility, I, Senpa Sazaruf, request to be appointed the officer in charge of carrying out this operation. What is your decision, Lieutenant General……?”

“……My apologies for burdening you with this.”

Even Ikta was unable to joke about this…… Continuing watching the hand wringing in the military conference would only result in death, that was beyond question. However, that drawing the short end of the stick was necessary to avoid the worse case scenario was a lamentable situation in the extreme.

“…….Hm? Hey, this isn’t like you at all. Don’t give me that expression. Though you guys were the ones who pushed me, ultimately I was the one who made the call, wasn’t I?”

Captain Sazaruf chuckled dryly and put a hand on top of Ikta’s head. At the very least, his face showed no signs he regretted his decision.

“Using a single company of 600 men to throw back an enemy force of 12000! Wouldn’t it be amazing if we really pull it off? Speaking of which, I can’t believe myself. Living to an age like this and still trying to be a hero.”

After a round of self-derision, the captain adopted a serious expression and turned his eyes onto the others.

“Switching gears — Lieutenant Matthew, Lieutenant Horo. If you like, the two of you can retreat to the rear.”

“What……?”

Haro seemed to have already gotten the memo, so the only who wore a shocked response was Matthew alone. With a grave expression, Captain Sazaruf continued explaining to the befuddled Matthew.

“The two of you are very diligent and, amidst the situation where other officers and cadets fell one after another, have accomplished your mission of surviving. This is, after all, the first tour of duty you have undergone.”

“No…… But…… Hasn’t the rearguard forces been decided already……?”

“Technically, it’s being drafted as we speak. Currently, I have the authority to pull in outside forces to take your spots. Seeing as none of them have done as much as you guys so far, don’t feel too bad about it.”

Faced with a sudden path of egress, Matthew could only stand there in a daze. At this time, Yatori also offered her two cents.

“Matthew, may I also chime in? After watching you from a close distance, I must say I am impressed. You remained calm even during repeatedly desperate straits and provided the leadership for your soldiers to fight bravely. This is the performance of an exemplary commander in anyone’s eyes. Take pride in this.”

Matthew turned wide eyes onto Yatori. Up until this moment in his life, he had never received such unreserved praise from Yatori.

“Haro is the same. With mountain sickness running rampant along the frontlines, your work ethic and performance were exemplary. If not for Haro’s unit, our own units would undoubtedly have shockingly high casualties.”

“……It’s been an honor.”

“The two of you would undoubtedly be fine commanders. –Precisely because of this, here is where you should learn when to retreat.”

The words of departure that opened with praises struck deeply into their chests. Ikta continued on.

“Yatori has already said the words I wanted to say…… However, Torway, I owe you an apology here. The Wind Gunners equipped with wind rifles are irreplaceable, so there is no way for you to leave. Best chalk it up to your own bad luck, but let’s work together moving forward.”

Although Ikta's mood was dark as he said this, Torway actually nodded with a proud expression across his features. On the other hand, the assessment of "irreplaceable" awarded to Torway struck a blow on the young man who did not win the same honors.

"At any rate, owing to these reasons, we shall bid a temporary farewell to you two. I don't know when the next time will be, but if possible, I would like to share a drink in Central — Wah!"

Ikta was planning on finishing his statement, but Matthew suddenly rushed forward and lifted him by the collar. Torway and Haro were about to intervene, but Yatori shook her head and halted them.

"……You see yourself entirely as the guardian. It's too dangerous so go home first? Who the hell do you think you guys are……!?"

"Ow ow ow…… Well…… You know, basically Yatori and I are now 1st Lieutenants……"

"Oh, right, here the two of you are ranking officers, that I can admit. That being said, under these circumstances, would a superior officer tell his troops "it's too dangerous, go home"? Would they use an excuse like "here is where you should learn when to retreat" to tell them to run? Bullshit! You know that's impossible!"

Matthew kept his hands locked onto Ikta's collar while shaking him like a rag doll. Ikta could only allow Matthew to do as he willed.

"Let me verify one thing! Up until the battles now, have I really been a burden?"

"……No, you have been a reliable comrade."

Ikta's dark eyes looked directly forward as he made this declaration. Without any hesitation, Yatori echoed his sentiment with a nod.

"Given that! At this time, what you should say to your comrades is not "you run away first"!"

This sentence was more like an angry howl. There was no disguise or embellishment within, and it was precisely this reason that it convinced the others.

One person remained suspended in mid air while the other stood there without moving a muscle. Ikta and Yatori found themselves both troubled over the same issue.

"……We will be faced with a harrowing battle, Matthew."

"Yeah."

"It's not going to be like before. You're going to lose a lot of your subordinates."

"Yeah."

"You yourself will be exposed to danger. A single mistake will kill you, just as bad luck will also

kill you."

"Yeah."

"Even if everything miraculously proceeds according to plan, there is still a chance that all of us still wind up dead."

"I know that!"

A stubbornness welled up within Matthew's heart, forcibly shoving aside all hesitation. At the same time, he thought…… it's time to admit to the difference in level. At least the current gap in their abilities was something he had to accept, albeit reluctantly.

In spite of this, they were all equal as comrades. Only this sense of pride was a creed that he would never let go.

"You guys must be planning on doing something about all this, right? Would I be a burden?"

In that instant, both Ikta and Yatori were filled with shame. The targets of said shame were they who a few minutes ago could not recognize Matthew's determination and careless words that trampled over his feelings. So, there was only one thing to say now.

"–I retract my earlier words. My sincere apologies, my friend Matthew."

"I too must apologize for my earlier rudeness. In the following battle, please lend us your strength."

After hearing this, Matthew loosened his hands around Ikta's collar.

"Seriously, you guys should have said this from the very beginning."

Faced with Matthew turning his face aside and muttering in displeasure, Ikta could only apologize again. On the other side, Yatori turned her eyes onto Haro.

"Haro, no matter how we put it, that was Matthew's answer. While it is your choice to emulate him, please remember not to be too affected by it and make a decision based on who you are. Even now, my proposal surrounding the hour of retreat has not changed."

Yatori used a stringent tone to query Haro. In contrast to her expectations, Haro had a ready reply.

"I will also stay. If the situation is that desperate, then all the more reason for me to help."

"Haro….."

"Honestly, if Mr. Matthew had been forcibly evacuated to the rear, I was planning on acting in concert with him. If I was accused of "being unneeded because I'm a burden", I really can't deny that."

Haro fiddled with her watery blue hair and revealed a bashful smile.

"But, if that's not the case…… If there's anywhere I can help, but allow Mr. Matthew and I to insist. To me, the "Knights Club" is an important place to cling to. Even for a short while, please allow me to help to protect that."

With that, Haro inclined her head deeply, to which Yatori swiftly raised her up.

"I am the one who should bow, Haro. I am sorry for acting in a manner that looked down upon your determination."

"As a fellow member of the "Knight's Club", I will also be relying on everyone's strength moving forward."

Ikta stepped over and put a hand on Haro's shoulder, who nodded while using the uniform sleeve to dab away at the corners of her eyes.

"……Ah~ To be young again. If this were five years ago, I might be one of you guys."

Captain Sazaruf, who had been watching the proceedings, appeared to be lost in his own memories. Directly ahead of this elder's warm gaze, Ikta raised his left hand to eye height as if suddenly remembering something.

"Haro, I do have something that needs your urgent attention. I actually just cut my hand……"

"Ah…… OK! Let me take a look at the wound, I'll immediately begin disinfecting and treating…… Eh…… Waaah! H, how come there's nothing there?! Mr. Ikta, why is your finger gone!?"

"What?" "Did you say finger gone……?"

Even Matthew and Torway came running over wide eyes. Having heard about the "negotiation tactics" before hand, Captain Sazaruf kept mum on the subject, to which Ikta replied back with a cheeky smile.

"Well~ My hand slipped while I was using a knife……"

"What did you do so that a slip took off your entire little finger? Where is the part that was cut off!?"

"I chopped it in three and gave it to a girl as a gift."

"Is that some sort of curse!?"

Captain Sazaruf chuckled wryly as he watched the five of them squabbling together before lighting a new cigarette. I really wish there's some way I can get all of these noisy kids back home alive — he thought.

Chapter 1

Thunderflare. Even in the annals of the Imperial Army, there was no comparable fireline on the same scale of the operation that bore this name.

By the time Yatori's Incendiary Corps arrived at the Gagarukasakan Forest that was on the northern front of the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the time until the enemy was upon them was just under 3 days and 11 hours. This was all the time that remained to them to construct an obstacle capable of halting 12000 men.

"From here on out, carry out your orders and proceed to your assigned stations in squads to began arson activities! There is no need to inquire for further instructions at every step, but send a messenger to report any complications that arise!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Excellent reply. Now that you understand your orders, dismissed!"

The fiery-haired commander had given the word, so the soldiers immediately scattered to the east and west. Inwardly, Yatori also wished to charge with them, but this time she was ordered ahead of time to remain in the camp currently being constructed that was to be their headquarters. The reason lay in that she was the most experienced incendiary expert here.

After sending off her subordinates, Yatori turned to run her eyes over the status of their base of operations. This location had also turned into a scorching battlefield. The majority of the soldiers were similarly opening the large rapeseed bags supplied from the rear and feeding the contents to hundreds of fire spirits — all so that the spirits could spit the oil back into the bags. Once this was done, the oil was ready to be the catalyst in their fire operations, so the full bags were immediately carried to the front lines.

Both the work pace and distribution of tasks devised by Yatori were highly simplistic. She divided the southern edge of the Gagarukasakan Forest into 86 zones and ordered the squads responsible for fire to head each zone while the headquarters in the rear produced and resupplied fuel. While directing the supply and production of oil, Yatori also remained at the base to handle any and all other circumstances that could arise. If a situation arose that necessitated her presence elsewhere, Captain Sazaruf would assume command at headquarters.

The ratio of fire spirits remaining at headquarters versus being dispatched to the fire zones was approximately 9:1. As this number signified, the majority of the fire spirits were irreplaceable assets in obtaining oil from the rapeseeds. The ones who were actually active on the frontlines were the wind spirits guiding the flames each time one was ignited.

"OK, start fanning the flames!"

Obeying Matthew's orders, the wind spirits of his subordinates began sending out fresh air from the

wind tunnel in their bodies. The oil liberally applied beforehand also did its work, allowing the flames supplied by oxygen to burst into a merry blaze. In a flash, tongues of fire tore into the Gagarukasakan Forest that was more dry forest than lush foliage.

"It's just as Ik-kun said, the wind is blowing towards the northeast…… No, it's still a little weak."

Working in another zone than Matthew, Torway couldn't help but pray that they received a little divine providence when remembering how wide the flames must spread. As long as the appropriate wind was on their side, the flames would progress even without further input; however, should favorable winds not appear, then extra legwork would be involved to make things happen. Setting aside the consequences if their task ends in failure, considering what was looming on the horizon, it was best to conserve whatever energy they could for their troops already exhausted by lengthy conflict.

"Whew…… Whew……"

In another zone, Ikta himself could be seen mixed among his subordinates while swinging an ax. The hour for taking it easy as a commander had long since passed. Now was an emergency situation where he had to throw himself into physical labor as well.

"Whew…… Whew…… Hurk! That hurts……!"

The wrenching pain that tore through his left hand like fire almost caused Ikta to drop the ax. There was no need to verify the reason, as the bandage covering his little finger was stained completely red.

While Haro had already closed the wound with stitches, simply that alone was naturally unable to completely repair that sort of injury. Waiting a few seconds for the pain to fade, Ikta was about to immediately throw himself back into the fray when, unable to stand it any longer, Sergeant Suuya tried to convince him otherwise.

"Commander! You've done enough……! Please leave the rest to us and take a break!"

"Your sentiment thrills me to no end, Suuya…… But this is a situation that would get us all killed if I take the lazy way out."

Ikta shook his head with a wry smile on his face while swinging the ax stained with his own blood back at the tree in front of him…… Of course, he was well aware that invalids forcing themselves to work will not provide any benefit to the task at hand and were likely to impede progress as well.

Nonetheless, his attitude was being witnessed by the soldiers around them. The sight of their usually lackadaisical commander hard at work while bleeding hammered home the idea of "how desperate their situation really was" in the post literal way possible. Faced with this scene, not a man among them was going to take it easy. Besides for the obvious fact that no subordinate could be lazing about while their commander was working, the more important reason was because Ikta's example clearly conveyed the truth that "laziness was the same as death now".

Of course, such an example does carry the risk of undesired after effects. Some soldiers may despair

after realizing “Is our current predicament that terrible?” after desert their posts. “In order to prevent soldiers from faltering, the commanding officer must always adopt a leisurely pose” was one of the first fundamentals for officers when it came to leading men.

On the other hand, Ikta had a history of surviving previous engagements with the least amount of casualties. From his subordinates’ perspective, he was undoubtedly a reliable commanding officer. Rather than causing his troops to waver, the sight of Ikta silently swinging his ax despite his injury only galvanized his men that “this was the time to put our backs into it”.

“Hey……!”

The decisive blow on the trunk caused the tree to collapse with a crash after being unable to sustain its own weight. One tree fell across the path at practically a perpendicular angle. This was a calculated outcome, as the surrounding soldiers had also hewed the trees across the path.

Ikta turned his head around to find his soldiers had already chopped down enough tree to cover nearly 100 yards down the path. After letting out a breath, he mopped away the sweat beading on his forehead.

“……Alright, this is enough to extend the conflagration. We don’t need to bring down any trees in the next area. All we need to do is cut a deep enough groove so that the trees will fall down in this direction once aflame. The fire will clean up everything else for us.”

Hearing Ikta’s instructions, the soldiers bedeviled by ruptured blisters all wore relaxed expressions. However, seeing as the young man’s left hand was in far worse condition, no one uttered a word of complaint.

There were five paths wide enough for an army to march through the Gagarukasakan Forest. Ikta’s group was currently positioned near the one closest to the center, a path that averaged 40 yards wide, far wider than another of the others. Aiming to move a large amount of troops through the forest at all possible speed, there was a high chance the Holy Aldera Army would come through here. Precisely why this location was seen as a vital point of operations.

Furthermore, even if they successfully induced a wildfire, any gap where the trees were hewn down may leave a gap in the flames. Hence why they needed to use this method of cutting down trees along the path to cover the openings left by the flames.

“……Once the arson preparations have finished, we must immediately erect a barricade here.”

Ikta muttered to himself, causing Sergeant Suuya to raise her head while replacing the bandage around his left hand.

“So it was impossible to stop the enemy with fire alone after all……?”

“No, we should be able to make this terrain impassable…… Yet, our mission is not to prevent the enemy from passing the forest, but to cause to be unable to proceed further from here. In order to

achieve this objective, we may have to open the lid here depending on how the situation unfolds."

Hearing her commander several years her junior deliver such a profound statement, Suuya continued dressing his injury while sneaking a peek at Ikta. She was unable to fathom exactly what sort of future was being envisioned by those black eyes.

In another theater, the 200 reinforcements from the Shinaak Tribe led by Nanak Dar were currently headed for the forest path that was slightly in the east.

Taking into account of the lingering friction, any plan that envisioned them working side by side with Imperial soldiers was nothing more than a pipe dream and swiftly discarded. Their current designation was "an independent unit led by Nanak who had accepted Ikta's request", so right now their only point of contact was handing off the oil resupply.

"Step lively and hurry up! If we don't get this started quickly, those Alderamin bastards will go right through the forest!"

"Ah…... Yes…...!"

Nanak led the Shinaak Tribesmen into the task at hand, but her countrymen were looking at her askance. This was only to be expected. After all, just when they had just been defeated in that quagmire of a war, here comes the Holy Aldera Army attacking from the north and all of a sudden their chieftain who was the first to rise against the Empire was now exhorting her fellows to cooperate with the Empire. Things were proceeding at such a rapid pace that exceeded their ability to comprehend.

However, this confusion was not enough to shatter their unity. Although Nanak was currently the leader of a defeated host, she still possessed leadership over the tribe. Not a single person accused her of being a "traitor" after ordering the tribe into battle against the Empire. Even now, the Shinaak people continued to obey the orders issued by their young chief.

Nor were there many among them who held it against Nanak for losing to the Empire. It was the unanimous decision of the entire Shinaak Tribe to declare war against the Empire, she just happened to be standing at the forefront of that movement.

Everyone understood that the responsibility for the defeat fell onto each of their shoulders. If anyone was to be an exception, then that person would be Nanak herself. She was deeply ashamed that she was unable to led her people to victory and resolved that her final duty was to ensure as many of her people survived through this as possible.

"Begin felling the trees from areas that have finished preparations! We're already a step behind the others, so there's no time to rest!"

Nanak gave her orders in a grave tone while throwing herself into work. Using her every inch of her petite body to swing the ax, a sudden thought ran across her mind — a hand missing the little fingers must find it incredibly difficult to hold an ax.

Ikta and company worked for 3 days and 14 hours. Validating Torway's assessment, 12000 men of the Ra Sai Alderamin Holy Army arrived at the northern fringes of the Gagarukasakan Forest at the peak of their readiness.

The fervor of holy war burned within the breast of each "crusader" wearing the dark blue uniform. Standing shoulder to shoulder, their combined presence seemed to fill the earth as they sang their praises to the high god as one. The chorus of 12000 men reverberated through the Grand Arfatra Mountains, seeking to cover the Shinaak lands with the divine authority.

Amidst this dominant formation, a sturdy man carried himself with the charisma befitting the warleader of 10000 men. His stature was both towering and broad, his head cleanly shaven to even reflect the sun overhead, all along with a tight mouth.

Though he was somewhat lacking for a soldier of a thousand battles, he did carry the appropriate air of a devout priest. This general who bore this duality was the general leading the Holy Aldera Army, Akugarpa Sa Domeisha.

"Kah — It's absolutely suffocating! Gives one the impression of being a smoked ham hanging in a smokehouse! Hahaha!"

Yet, the moment he opened his mouth, fully half of that initial impression — being the devout priest aspect — was immediately overturned. His adjutant heaved a sigh beside him — as one in service of god, this general's words were far too coarse.

Regardless, General Akugarpa had hit the nail on the head with his feelings. The dense smoke flowing through the forest covered the surrounding scenery in a murky gray. A single breath of this into the lungs brought about stabbing pain and sent the soldiers hacking and coughing.

While the general and his men fully revelled in their shared complaints of "how suffocating it was", the forward scouts with their reconnaissance report. Among the forward troops that had dispatched to the east and west to observe the situation, an officer whose face had been blackened by the smoke made the report on behalf of the group.

"Reporting in, General! We have verified that the five paths leading through the Gagarukasakan Forest have all been blocked by fallen trees and wildfire! Currently, we are unable to proceed!"

"I thought as much! ……Speaking of which, to think the enemy could set the entire forest ablaze! What madness! Surely an act that befits men who are utterly pressed into a corner! Gahahaha!"

General Akurga burst into laughter while his adjutant, Colonel Michelin, diplomatically chimed in from the side.

"Any delay here would impact our moves to pursue the enemy's main force. What are your orders?"

"This hardly bears saying. Go put out that damn fire immediately."

"Since you have given the order…… But realistically speaking, how are we going to go about that?"

“Hm, I’m assuming everyone going over and pissing on the fire would be insufficient?”

“That is indeed a novel concept, but I fear we will be unsuccessful.”

The adjutant sternly vetoed that proposal. General Akurga folded his arms over his chest and began contemplating the situation.

“……Then perhaps I should join in.”

“General, I warrant that if your entire lower body was a bladder, you would do nothing more than douse the ground beneath your feet.”

“Gah — how aggravating! Leaving the fire alone is out of the question! Hey, Michelin, call that scruffy lad over here!”

Colonel Michel didn’t immediately act on the order and adopted a grimace.

“……We haven’t even officially struck a blow in this campaign yet. Do we have to rely on that person already?”

“What’s got you in a twist? All I want is to have that freeloader do a little bit of work. Regardless of whether he is a visiting officer, once that guy is part of the chain of command then he’s nothing more than my subordinate. What’s wrong with using this situation to order him about?”

That statement left Colonel Michelin without any rebuttal, so all he could do was order a cavalry trooper to hunt down their problem child. Before the two of them could even change the subject, a young man with white hair could be seen spurring his horse to meet them. The uniform about his shoulders was not dark blue, but an entirely different deep green.

“Yah, General, you have summoned me? It is an honor to be called upon!”

Colonel Michelin sourly glared at the officer speaking from atop the horse with a lively cadence.

“Major, first you need to dismount. In this army, that is the minimal respect demanded towards superiors.”

“Pardon my manners! According to my predictions, I will need to be leaving shortly on horseback, so I accidentally took the lazy route.”

Without a hint of a regret, the man leapt off the horse and turned himself to face the two superior officers. General Akurga couldn’t help but snort at this fearless attitude.

“You got here within two minutes? You seem to be highly energetic today as well, lad.”

“Syah, that is my only advantage — I’m sure you would like me to come up with some sort of countermeasure to this situation?”

“If you can’t think of anything, then you will be joining in the pissing brigade.”

“Hah…... What an original idea, though alas I have no urge to urinate right now…...”



“Is that so? So long as it’s a fluid, there’s no need to fixate on urine…...”

General Akurga took the wind musket from his adjutant and made a show of examining the bayonet attached to the musket while glancing at the other man’s neck. With a clap, the young man with white hair seemed to have come up with an idea.

“Even if you chop my head off and wrung my entire body like a rag, I fear you wouldn’t get much liquid out of the hassle. Let’s consider this from another angle. Water is not necessarily what you need when fighting a fire.”

“Hm? Then what are you going to use against the conflagration in front of us?”

“Mum, well, as the good saying goes — a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye. Let’s light a fire of our own.”

Hearing the other man’s nonchalant words, General Akurga’s eyes widened.

At the same time on the other side of the fire, a young man with black hair was currently observing the sight of the forest crumbling before the roaring flames.

“Whew…... Looks like we made it in time…... Although we were the instigators, but we did merrily set it alight, Kusu.”

“That’s not that important. Ikta, the wound on your left hand has opened again.”

While the spirit companion riding in the bag around his waist expressed genuine concern, Ikta wore a revolted expression.

“Nope, not looking at it…... It hurts enough that I want to cry, so looking at it would make it even worse…...”

“But, it’ll grow worse if you leave it alone.”

Without any recourse, Ikta could only hunt through his pockets for a replacement bandage, but his fingers closed in on nothing. Now that he thought about it, the large pile of bandages he had stuffed in there earlier had already been dipped into four or five times.

“–Ah, as expected. I was thinking you were probably all out by now.”

Materializing like a miracle was Haro with a medkit tucked under her arm. Without a word, she came to a stop next to the young man and unwrapped the dirty bandage to gaze at the wound. Then, she used her companion, the water spirit Miru, to conjure clean water to wash away the grime on the wound’s surface.

“The wound broke open again…... Didn’t I tell you to keep movement to a minimum?”

“Sorry, sorry. Although if you’re only talking about the injury, then I can slightly let it rest from now on. After all, my inept mission of imitating a lumberjack has already come to an end…... Ouch!”

Exposed to the air, the wound sent out a particularly strong lance of pain, forcing a cry from Ikta’s mouth. Hearing the shriek, Haro raised her eyes to look upon his face.

“…...Please do not force yourself. The finger is one of the parts on the human with most nerves, and now Mr. Ikta has sliced off the entire finger from the root…...”

“…...Urk! I, it’s OK, I feel a lot better compared to the first night it was cut off.”

Even now, Ikta could feel a chill down his spine whenever he recalled that sleepless night in the tent where he could only roll around in agony. Likewise, Haro seemed to share in his pain as she imagined his suffering while handing a palm-sized bag from her medkit to Ikta.

“…...If the pain becomes overwhelming, please chew on this for a bit. It should help alleviate the pain.”

After receiving the bag and loosening the drawstring, Ikta found dark herbs stuffed to capacity within. An instant after seeing this, a smile of salvation spread across the young man’s face.

“These are cocoa leaves, right? Thanks a bunch. Can you really give such a large ration to me alone?”

“Don’t worry about that, but please restrain your intake each time. Using too much at a time can be

dangerous."

Ikta lightly nodded at the kind warning before using his fingertips to pop a few leaves into his mouth. After a few chews, the contents began mixing into his saliva and the portions that came into contact with his mouth before feeling slightly numb.

"How nostalgic…... There was a time when I had studied with Old Man Anarai on what was the best way to utilize these things. Although we initially were seriously considering medical applications, my half-hearted joke at boiling these in sugar water created an deviously delicious juice. Since the possibility of overdosing was simply too high, the recipe was immediately sealed. Should that taste ever be released, I'm sure it would immediately take the world by storm, but now I wonder when it will see the light of day…..."

Ikta closed his eyes reminiscing while the pain receded. Here, Haro piped up:

"Mr. Ikta. When you're feeling really down, please do find a person to talk to. And I don't mind just about your injury….."

"Ha, my thanks Haro, but you're reading too much into it. Do I look like the type to knuckle down and bear with the pain?"

"……I heard from Ms. Yatori earlier that you were once on excellent terms with the chieftain of the Shinaak Tribe."

Haro was not fooled by Ikta's cheery attitude and dove straight into the subject. For a moment, Ikta was robbed of any words.

"From the start of the war until now, Mr. Ikta, you haven't had any time that you could completely unburden yourself, correct?"

"……That's a bit of a stretch. Once the war began stagnating, everyone has been bearing with it too, right?"

"That may be true. However, Mr. Ikta has been asked to take on much more than anyone else."

After providing a clean bandage, Haro once again turned a pained look at the young man's left hand that was missing a finger that should be there. Unable to withstand her eyes, Ikta hid the left hand behind his back.

"My apologies for interrupting your conversation, but a report just came in. The enemy is on the move."

This sudden yet austere voice that interrupted their dialogue came from Yatori and Captain Sazaruf as they came from their position closer to the mountains. After saluting the captain, Ikta and Haro turned to face the two of them.

"Good work, both of you. How is Lieutenant Ikta's left hand doing?"

“A new little finger has not yet made itself known, though I put that down to a lack of good food recently?”

Since their fireline operation capable of stopping the enemy advance had been completed, they were able to recover a little leisurely time to engage in chit chat. The captain was highly reassured by Ikta’s loose cannon of a mouth and turned his gaze towards the mountain.

“Still, what a wondrous feeling — to think we would be relying on our allies to the rear for intel on the enemy’s movements. Although it does make sense that our higher vantage point gives us a clear view of the enemy’s position on the other side of the mountain……”

“Please chalk this up to our terrain advantage. Since our forces are desperately outnumbered, even splitting off troops for reconnaissance would be difficult.”

“Even if we did send out scouts, there’s still a wall of fire of our creation in front of us — let’s get to the heart of the matter.”

Yatori ended the small talk and brought up the real subject.

“This is the report that came from the rear, the enemy seems to have set a fire of their own in the forest.”

Haro was the only one who adopted a shocked expression at this news, whereas Ikta’s expression hardened even though he too heard of this for the first time.

“……A controlled burn, eh? So the other side has also taken decisive action.”

A wary glint edged its way into those dark pupils. Controlled burn was a method that could be employed when normal tactics like spraying water or swatting could not adequately fight a fire that was spreading rapidly. It’s literal application was to heads towards where the fire was predicted to advance and lit a flame under carefully controlled circumstances, causing everything that could serve as fuel to burn itself out before putting out the flames. A burnt out zone like this would in and of itself prevent the fire from carrying into other areas. From a results perspective, the maximum extent of the fire could be limited just as the time it took to bring the fire under control could be decreased, but……

“A single mistake could cause the fire to spread even further, so this tactic is not lightly employed…… Is there an officer who has experience with forest fires in the Holy Aldera Army?”

“And the decision was made at an abnormally swift speed. It’s barely been two days since the enemy arrived, but they have already enacted countermeasures already.”

“Exactly. “Discovering the entire forest is on fire during their march” should come as a rude shock to them, so I had honestly expected them to mill about in confusion for a bit. Our mission to buy time should have been easier while the enemy commanders debated over a possible solution……”

Finding his earlier projections thrown out the window so soon caused Ikta to mutter and scratch at his

scalp. Yatori also pressed a hand to her chin as she pondered this.

"……I also find this peculiar. This is not because we're underestimating the enemy, but basically speaking the Holy Aldera Army comes from Ra Sai Alderamin, a country that has remained neutral from any major conflicts for more than 100 years, correct? Would an army from such a country be able to react to unforeseen circumstances with such alacrity?"

"What about this? Perhaps the one who came up with the controlled burn was not a soldier from that country?"

Captain Sazaruf suddenly interjected into the conversation, causing Ikta and Yatori to raise their heads at the same time.

"……Captain, what do you mean?"

"All of you must have ran across this in class, right? In order to maintain the military standards of a country like Ra Sai Alderamin that had nothing to do with war for so long, both the Empire and Republic sent military instructors. From a political perspective, a neutral country that was too weak was not a desirable outcome for either country."

"That must be what they call a visiting officer…… So that's the background behind it."

"Under the current situation, the personnel dispatched from the Empire must be on pins and needles, right? Then again, what about the ones sent from the Republic? If we treat the Kioka Republic as the one who instigated the entire sequence of events by inciting the Shinaak Tribe to rebel, then……"

Captain Sazaruf did not finish the words with ulterior interpretations. Yatori placed a hand over her forehead as if trying to search her memories.

"……While we were in Central, I had heard someone mention this. Two years ago, the officer dispatched from the Kioka Republic to Ra Sai Alderamin was incredibly young by conventional standards, and he had a head full of white hair to boot. Irrespective of night or day, he worked harder than anyone else to the point that no one ever saw him retire to rest."

"Incredible, it's practically as if god created someone else to balance the scales against me."

"Yeah, that's what I thought when I first heard this. This officer bears a nickname, which should be –"

"OK! Light it!"

Upon hearing the sergeant give the order, a certain Incendiary trooper within the Holy Aldera Army clumsily tossed the firebrand into the grass before him. His comrades were carrying out similar tasks all around him as fire broke out to the left and right, but perhaps something had gone wrong as the area he was responsible for remained free of smoke.

"You there! How come it isn't burning!? What are you doing?"



"Ah…... Yes…...!"

After being scolded by his superior, the soldier brought a skin filled with oil and frantically scrambled into the bushes.

"Damn it, have I poured enough yet…...?"

The man muttered as he liberally applied the oil on the surrounding undergrowth. At this time, he was suddenly aware of a rather warm air caressing him around his feet, where he had rather lost track of while immersed in this task.

"…...How warm…...?"

Shocked, the soldier direct his gaze downward to find laughing flames mocking him from beneath the knees of his uniform. The firebrand he had thrown in earlier had somehow managed to get onto him.

"Ah…... Wah!"

Although the soldier tried to put out the flames in a haphazard manner, his efforts at brushing them away yielded no results. The tongues of fire that gradually traveled upward caused the soldier to even ignore his spirit's cries as he delved into utter panic.

"H, help me! I'm on fire…...!"

Even his comrades were terrified out of their wits when he stormed out of the underbrush with his lower body aflame. There was no large source of water nearby to put the fire out. Wary of also sharing his fate, everyone the soldier sought for help kept him at arm's length.

"S, someone think of something! Help!"

Denied any aid, the soldier's panic mounted. However, before his cries became tragic, the sound of hoof beats rang out behind him. In the next instant, someone pulled the soldier up by the collar and lifted his entire body into the air.

"Wah…...!" "Yah, do not worry! Stop struggling now!"

The rider continued to gallop forward with his right hand lifting the soldier along. Taking full advantage that the soldier had gone docile from behind lifted by the neck, he rapidly passed through the stunned crowd.

"Hay!"

Along the way, the rider suddenly released the right hand wrapped around the soldier's collar. Gravity pulled the soldier's body downward into a hole that was dug into the ground ahead of time. The soldiers holding spades around the hole while waiting for further orders could only stare in shock.

“Alright, you men, quickly cover him in dirt! Wepssy! Quickly, quickly!”

Halting a few steps in front of them, the rider immediately roused the men to action as they carried out his orders. Their spades dug into the dirt mound and sought to bury the lower half of their comrade that was currently aflame. Though the man in question shrieked in pain, no one paid him the slightest attention.

“Good! The fire is out……!”

The soldier was buried into the dirt from the neck down as the spades finally came to a halt. Just as the soldier felt like a corpse being covered in dirt, the man responsible for bringing him over here gave him a once over from atop the horse with those white eyes of his.

“Hah, thank goodness we made it in time. Medics! Please take care of his burns.”

Hearing this, the soldier finally realized he had been saved. Deprived of oxygen by the large amount of wet dirt, the flames that should have consumed him were extinguished. Without a large body of water nearby, this was the ideal way of putting out fires.

“T…… Thank you very –”

Without bothering to hear the words of gratitude, the man who saved him was already spurring his horse elsewhere. The soldier could only watch the man depart at incredible speed while one his comrades holding a spade nearby said to him:

“He actually saved you twice. The first time was of course when he brought you over here. There is also the time that Kiokan predicted that guys like you would make silly mistakes and ordered a hole to be dug.”

It was only now that the soldier realized that man was not wearing uniform of the Holy Aldera Army. As he looked around in confusion, one of his comrades chuckled wryly.

“What, is this the first time you saw him with your own eyes? Even so, surely you have heard the rumors? Rumors regarding the one that gallops around by day and drafts reports by night, the man who came from distant Kioka without bothering to setup a sleeping pallet in his own room –”

Overwhelmed by their efforts to deal with the fire, the Holy Aldera Army welcomed their second night beneath the Grand Arfatra Mountains.

“–I’m coming in, Jean. I’ve brought tea.”

The sight that greeted the female adjutant who first called out a greeting before stepping inside was a desk covered in research materials illuminated by light spirits along with her commanding officer scrawling reports.

“Syool! Thank you, Miara. Is this red tea full of sugar? Or that slightly bitter green tea?”

The man named Jean kept his eyes glued to the table, but responded in a casual tone. The young female officer named Miara watched the back of that snow white head before sighing lightly.

“Seeing as these are military rations, it is unfortunately the barley tea you have grown heartily sick of in Alderamin.”

“Hah, just so. Although I do not loath it, I must admit this something altogether different than tea.”

Miara deposited the tea cup in the hands of the man who replied back to her with a rueful grin. At this time, she noticed among the myriad documents sprawled over the table, several leaflets carried lines written with a firm hand.

“You seem to be generously wasting resources. Was there something that caught your attention?”

“I am organizing the tactics we will be using into several categories, as our opponent looks to be quite a handful.”

“Quite a handful……? We haven’t even come to blows yet, right?”

“If would be much simpler if our opponent was someone whom we could readily engage in combat, but that is not the case. Our enemy quickly abandoned any hope of facing us directly and devoted all of their energy into buying time even at the cost of burning down the entire forest.”

“That’s true. This is the first time I’ve run into this kind of situation.”

Here, Jean exchanged the pen in his right hand for the teacup as he turned his entire chair to face his adjutant. He possessed a slim yet sturdy physique, a head full of white hair without the use of any hair dye, along with youthful features that stood in stark contrast to his hair. These were accompanied by his white eyes, eyes that gave men the mistaken impression that they glimmered with ethereal light.

“Mum…… Not only is this strategy daring, but their execution is superb. Even if they picked men from their exhausted forces, carrying out all this with the Shinaak Tribe threatening them from behind their back compounds the difficulty. Thus, our opponent must have planned for that…… I suspect they must have come to terms with the tribal leaders in the form of a ceasefire or by uniting against the common enemy that our forces represent.”

“Uniting against? I find it difficult to imagine working alongside enemies trying to kill each other the day before. Could their self esteem survive that?”

“Yah, what you say is true……. However, no matter how favorable the calculation is, the Imperial Army could not possibly have detected our presence more than 6 days in advance. We just arrived here yesterday, so their original buffer was only around 5 days. During this time, they had to end the civil war, successfully persuade the Shinaak Tribe to lend their assistance, then dispatch the necessary personnel to begin operations…… Given the results, they completed the defenses needed to halt our invasion.”

Jean’s smile deepened as a fey sense of expectation slowly crept in.

"At this desperate hour, who is this man that could accomplish all this with the Imperial Army in tatters?"

"…………"

"Inciting the Shinaak Tribe and assassinating Yuskushiram Taekk…... These elements were critical in launching this insurrection. However, the fundamental basis of all this was built on the ineptitude of the Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Garrison, Lieutenant General Tamshiikushik Safida. If he possessed the ability and self-control as befitting a man of his station, we would never have had the opening in the first place."

"The tragedy of fools in high positions is a rather commonplace event."

"Syah, as you say. However, careful study of history also contain examples of the opposite. Examples of brilliant men denied their full potential by woeful superiors but repeatedly demonstrating their outstanding talent on the battlefield."

Jean said this as his eyes drifted over to the map on the table. His heated gaze was directed to the tags showing the other side of the Gagarukasakan Forest, where a worthy foe awaited him.

"This person does not possess high rank. If this was the case, the situation would have improved much sooner. Must be a case of a lower officer receiving a battlefield promotion along with broad range of authority. Is he or she a colonel like me? Maybe a captain…… Even if a staff officer, perhaps on the lower end of the totem pole. Regardless, this person is on the other side of the wall of fire."

"In other words, this enemy will be quite the handful. Excited, Jean?"

"I want to behold someone I've never seen before, surely everyone would think the same?"

Miara could sigh in response to Jean's obliviousness to any oddity in himself and retreated one step. After reestablishing the space between leader and subordinate with this action, she reported in a solemn tone.

"…...Thus far, our allied forces encamped in the mountains have not reported in. We surmise that this is because they are cut off from our forces and that long periods of activity behind enemy lines have exhausted their supply of carrier pigeons."

"Even your older brother would have some difficulty traversing that fire…… The controlled burns will need some time before they achieve any effects, so perhaps we should consider options to reestablish communications?"

"I estimate that more carrier pigeons will be released at dawn, so for now that is sufficient…… Even if we left them alone, they will act accordingly to disrupt the enemy camp. After all, this is the Phantoms' duty."

Seeing Miara put forth such a strong guarantee as if it was her own task in question, Jean nodded in

satisfaction.

"–Understood. Given the current stage, there are few options for reestablishing communications anyways. We will focus on our own objectives and leave your brother's unit to their own devices. Is that alright, Lieutenant Miara Gin."

"I have no objections. It is an honor to have your trust, Colonel Jean Arkinex."

Jean chuckled wryly at his adjutant saluting smartly before changing the subject.

"The hour is late, Miara. Take a break."

"As you command. So Jean, how do you plan on passing the long night?"

"Mum, based on today's observations, I must account for the errors on our maps and terrain as well as calculate the additional supplies needed due to the delay of our invasion. Then, I will assess the proper allocation of soldiers along the five paths through the forest. After that, I let my imagination take me to morning. Imaging what sort of worthy foe awaits me on the other side of that fire."

This speech, so similar to a young girl in love, struck Miara in the wrong way, causing her to sigh and try to dampen his ardor.

"That is all well and good, but please don't get your hopes up. In order to imagine someone strong enough to threaten you, it would be far easier to visualize what god looks like — at least, that's how I would feel."

Miara left these words behind and ducked out of the tent. However, she ran into a familiar face at the doorway.

"Ho, Miara, you were here as I expected."

Here was a swarthy man wearing the same Kioka uniform who towered over others. He was approximately in his 30s, rippled with muscles, and had a captain's pins on his chest.

"Captain Harrah, you are also up at such hours."

Like Jean, the man named Harrah had an easy-going personality and treated others with kindness that surpassed the basic relationship between leader and subordinates. After checking that there was no one else, Miara also relaxed a little.

"Jean is inside. Is something the matter?'

"There is something, but talking to you would be faster. Have we got in touch with the infiltrating unit?"

"Not yet. I just gave the report to Jean and the conclusion is to continue as we are. Besides from sending the carrier pigeons, our forces do not need to take further actions to reestablish

communications.”

“If that is Jean’s decision, I have no objection…… But, aren’t you worried about your brother, Miara?”

“Not really. My brother’s unit usually operates behind enemy lines, though with our advance blocked by the fire, we should be thankful that we have allies on the other side.”

Miara replied back to her superior officer’s concern with her typical aloofness. After making sure she was not putting up a tough front, Harrah turned his eyes from her to focused on the man hard at work in the tent.

“–Is Jean up to his usual tricks tonight?”

“Not only that, his eyes are particularly bright. Said something about a worthy foe in the enemy camp.”

“I can definitely echo that feeling. In all honesty, I was shocked at the deftness at which they carried out this defensive plan using a wall of fire. While I do not know what will happen next, depending on the situation, the Holy Aldera Army may lack the experience to react properly.”

With that, Harrah gazed at the mountains with a grim expression. Looking upon the fire that was especially conspicuous at night, Miara smiled as if unconcerned.

“Even if that’s the case, then all I feel is pity towards the heroes waiting for us on the other side. Regardless what kind of talent or ability they possess, to stand on this stage and age was their mistake.”

“Hm, I can agree to that as well. If there was only the Holy Aldera Army here, then perhaps the enemy could find a way to handle them, but –”

The half finished sentence cued the two of them to turn their eyes back to the tent together. Between the tent flaps, their commander’s ramrod straight back could be seen. Even though his figure was just sitting there, his boundless energy was readily apparent, along with the effortless dance of his pen that knew not what exhaustion meant.

“How dependable — our “Shining Sleepless General” once again is undisturbed by dreams.”

“Those white eyes burn with fire, all to guarantee the path to victory.”

An unyielding trust that bordered on faith rested in the hearts of both Miara and Harrah as they seemed to play a game of words back and forth. The man in question was wholly oblivious to the conversation behind him as handled the tasks with unrelenting motions while contemplating about his unseen enemy in a corner of his mind.

–Colonel Jean Arkinex of the Kioka Republican Army. Known as the “Shining Sleepless General” among men.



A legendary figure who was lauded in the same manner as the “Wise General of Indolent Victory” by future chronicles of the age.

Chapter 2: The Sloth VS The Insomniac

"It's about time, let's engage the enemy."

Ikuta said in the headquarters tent, making most of the members seated at the table with him wonder if there was something wrong with their hearing.

"You want to have a battle with them… What nonsense is that? Haven't our efforts to burn the entire forest down because of the wide gap in our numbers made it impossible for us to fight a normal stalling battle?"

Matthew asked with a shocked expression, and Ikuta acknowledged this natural reaction with a nod.

"It is as you said, Matthew. Burning the forest had the same result as we predicted, the Holy Aldera Army are stalled at the other side of the forest, and the fire line of defence is going smoothly."

"Then there isn't anything to worry about right? We just need to keep up our surveillances, and keep the fire going…"

"You need to think through it carefully, Matthew. Under such circumstances, the enemy would make a detour."

Yatori who was seated opposite Ikuta, with Captain Sazaruf between the two of them interjected. When he heard that, Matthew turned stiff, then leaned towards the rectangular table the group was seated at.

"… Wait! Is a detour possible?!"

"Judging purely from the terrain—— Nana, can you explain the details?"

The Shinaak Tribal Chief who was sitting docilely to the right of Ikuta nodded frankly after hearing this request, and pulled the map on the center of the table towards her.

"The Arfatra Mountains are our turf. Compared to the south, there aren't many tribesmen living in the north, but thankfully, our ancestors had paved a road in order access more territory. The Gagarukasakan forest road which the Aldera Army bastards originally wanted to take was also paved by us in our pursuit for more land to the north."

Half way through Nanak's speech, Captain Sazaruf pounded his fist onto his palm as if he understood.

"Now that she mentioned it, I remember a commotion that happened in the past. When I was still a Second Lieutenant, so about 7 or 8 years ago… Aldera sent us a complaint, protesting that the Shinaak was ignoring the national boundaries, and was moving freely on the north side of the Arfatra Mountains. The Northern Stronghold was forced to take action, and I remembered bracing myself for

it to devolve into a riot. I felt relieved when it ended with just a warning."

"Hmmp, that's a boundary you decided on your own, there isn't anything written on the land that states who owns it in the first place."

Nanak expressed her dissatisfaction. Before the topic becomes unnecessary complicated, Ikuta smoothly stepped in to ease the mood.

"Anyway, because of this, the Shinaak are familiar with the terrain to the north of the mountains. Nana, did you raise the possibility of a detour based on your knowledge?"

"That's right. From the western edge of the Gagarukasakan forest and moving further out, you can get into the mountain trail used by my tribesmen in the past to access water at the foot of the mountain. It is too small for a large number to pass through, but if they choose their path carefully, it is possible to move behind us. I walked along these paths personally when I was preparing for war, so this information is absolutely guaranteed."

"Ik-kun, if that is the case, the enemy would have no reason to stay here and fight us…"

In response to Torway's disheartening words, Ikuta shook his head.

"It's not that simple either. Torway, let me ask you this: Do you think the Holy Aldera Army predicted that they would need to go around Gagarukasakan forest when they planned their campaign?"

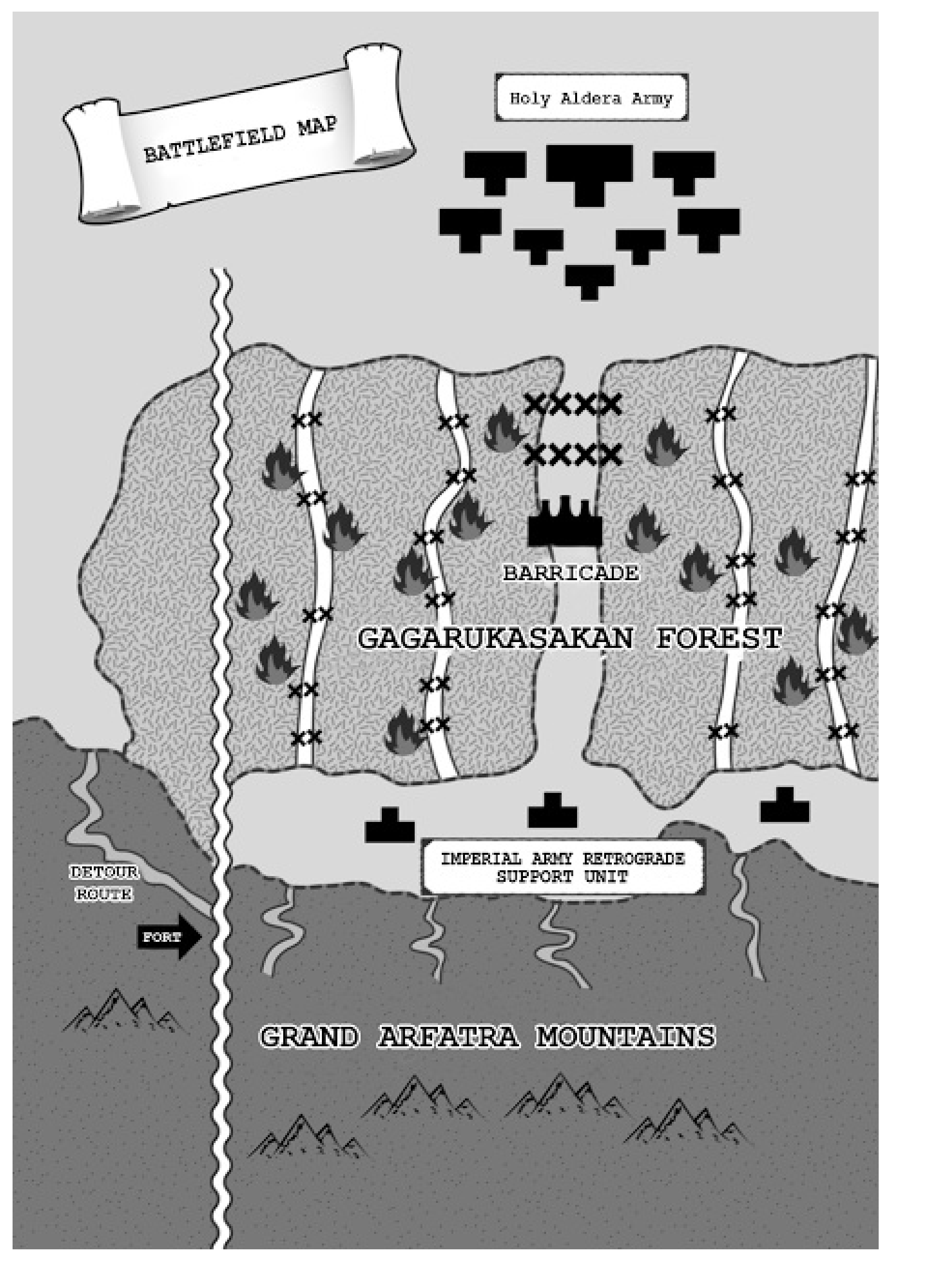
"… That is unlikely. There are five possible paths in the forest, if it was up to me, I would judge that there were more than enough options available on the ground. Even though there might be ambushes along the way, it would still be easier than fighting after scaling the mountain."

"That is an adequate judgement. Unless they predicted that a huge fire defense line would make the route impassable, they wouldn't have considered the necessity of securing an alternate way. Of course, I couldn't be sure that the enemy didn't think this far—"

"— But if they did, it would be strange as they didn't change their direction of advance earlier. They didn't send a detachment to take the detour path either… No matter what, the enemy didn't make any moves that to suggest they thought that far."

Yatori helped to shore up the explanation. At this moment, Haroma who was sitting diagonally across her raised her hand a little.

"But what do you think about them attacking fire with fire? Since our opponent implemented such a plan smoothly, that is evidence that they had expected this much…"



“I was surprised about this too, but I think that was a tactic someone came up with after observing the situation. And that person might have the knowledge on how to counter fire, but not to the extent of predicting that they would be blocked by a wall of flames. In this case, we should take this as a sign that the one who proposed it had enough influence to start the countermeasures smoothly.”

This wasn’t for certain, but there were too many unknowns, so Ikuta didn’t brood over it too much. He continued onto the next topic:

“As for the tactic of fighting fire with fire, there is no way it will put out the flames dramatically faster. Considering the fact that the widest path in the middle of the forest isn’t being burnt, we can assume that the enemy is only treating this as a backup plan. They won’t wait docilely for the fire to burn out, it’s about time they make a move.”

“So you are expecting the enemy to scout for an alternate route? In order to stop them, we need to draw their attention here, so it is necessary to fight a battle with them at this time.”

Captain Sazaruf concluded, and Ikuta was thankful for his summary.

“Before the civil war, the elite ‘phantom unit’ from Kioka already infiltrated the Arfatra Mountains. They had probably obtained knowledge on the surrounding lands, and relayed the geographical details to their home nation… Therefore, it would be too optimistic to assume that the Holy Aldera Army who were goaded into invading us didn’t know about the alternate path Nana mentioned just now.”

“In other words, the Holy Aldera Army is hesitating between these two options? One is to break through the walls of fire and continue their march, the other way is to give up and send their troops down the alternate path.”

“Making the detour would be a bitter choice for the enemy. If they take the long way around, it will definitely mess up their timing to attack the retreating Imperial forces… However, stalling them for that long wouldn’t be enough for our goal. The best estimate for our allies to finish their retreat would be 14 days. Sooner or later, the unit behind us would need to take over the mission in a field battle, but we are still the biggest obstacle in the way of the Holy Aldera Army. So for the next eight days, I want to stall the enemy right here.”

As Ikuta stated a clear number of days, everyone present turned tense…However, Torway who felt uneasy, suddenly said:

“What should we do if the enemy tried breaking through from the front while simultaneously taking a detour? For example, leaving half their forces here, and the other half making a detour…”

Matthew and Haroma both let out an ‘ah’, but Ikuta shook his head.

“This might be possible if the enemy numbered above 20,000. But they only have 12,000. Even though the main Imperial forces suffered losses during the long civil war, we still have 6,000 men aside from us. From the perspective of the invader fighting on away grounds, no matter how you dice it, any analysis would show that it is unwise to divide their forces here.”

“It might be difficult for them to split their forces in half, but the enemy might be planning for their forces to link up after they breakthrough into the mountains, and send a part of their men to make the detour, that’s possible right? For example, dispatching a thousand or two soldiers…”

“That might be possible, but it would be a problem for later. The number of ratio of cavalry in the Holy Aldera Army isn’t too high. If they send more than a thousand man to detour, they would mainly be infantry, and they would need to move at their pace no matter how fast they march. In other words, even if they move out right now, they would only reach three days later. For our part, we need to observe how the enemy moves, and depending on the situation, send half of our forces to intercept. However——”

“—— For the detour path, there is a narrow stretch right before the path forks that is advantageous for the defenders, and there is a fort there too. It hasn’t been maintained for a long time, but I already contacted our comrades at our back, and it can be fixed up in just two days. Even if the enemy outnumber us by five folds, there wouldn’t be a problem holding our ground for 4 to 5 days.”

After Nanak finished, Captain Sazaruf raised his hand suddenly.

"… Can I mention something? When we start fighting off the enemy, what if those guys… The phantom unit approaches from the rear?"

"I don't plan to let them come so close. Our allies are keeping an eye on the main mountain routes, and we have a wide vantage of view in this place. Unless they are real phantoms, it would be impossible for them to stab our backs unnoticed."

"… I hope so…"

Captain Sazaruf looked a bit anxious, but didn't say anything. The black haired youth took note that they would need to talk later, and turned his gaze onto Torway.

Due to the plan formulated by Ikuta and its feasibility guaranteed by the Shinaak natives, most of their worries were dispelled—— But despite that, Torway had no choice but to raise his final concern.

"… What if enemy reinforcements appears in the next few days?"

At this point of the discussion, Ikuta failed to reply immediately for the first time. He spent some time to choose his words slowly, then answered:

"If that happens, I will send more troops to the fort at the detour path and try holding the front line. This would mean less people being here, but it should be manageable to a certain extent… But on the off chance that the enemy reinforcement is larger than what we can handle — Although that chance is really low, considering the military forces Aldera possesses — Then it's checkmate, there's nothing I can do about it."

Ikuta frankly announced the worst that could happen, and the air turned heavy.

There wasn't any way around it no matter what they did… Such a situation might arise. The young soldiers used their imaginations to visualize what would happen to them should they suffer the worst luck.

"But don't worry, I have already thought of an argument to handle that situation."

The young man said with a sarcastic smile and Yatori asked immediately: "What would you say?"

Actually, the two of them had been acquainted for a long time, so she could more or less tell what would happen.

"『— Please spare me, I never dreamed that my actions would be punished by God.』"

"『Why? Tell me your reason.』"

Acting in concert with Ikuta who started talking in a sad tone, Yatori started responding with a stern voice akin to a priest.

“『I heard the voice of God in the past, and that was the reason behind everything.』”

“『What happened?』”

“『Back then, God said ——「Actually, I don’t exist.」』”

A moment later, air was expelled from several mouths. Matthew and Haroma laughed directly, while Torway averted his face with a hand on his mouth. Captain Sazaruf seemed really amused by it, and was laughing with his head down and hands on his stomach.

“… And from that, everyone should understand how thorough my preparation is — Alright, anyone have any questions about the discussion so far? If not, we will move on to the next topic.”

Except for Yatori, everyone nodded while trying to stifle their laughter. After confirming the mood had turned serious again, Ikuta got to the point.

“I said we should fight a battle with the enemy, but we can’t do that with even odds. Let’s talk about the details of our battle plan — And of course, I want to make the fight as easy as possible.”

*

“Ughh….”

During the entire time from daybreak until a little after noon, General Akugarpa kept making weird sounds intermittently. Lieutenant Colonel Michelin tried talking to the General in the beginning, but decided to ignore him and adopt the attitude to not look for trouble.

“Shhhyyyyaaaa! You are too slow you imbecile!”

The General suddenly roared even though no one was in front of him. The soldiers in the vicinity all turned and looked at him, Lieutenant Colonel Michelin also looked at his superior in surprise.

“… General, who were you reprimanding just now?”

“Hmmp, don’t worry. I am not lashing out at you or blaming the scout who went to recce the front. I just feel that if I keep suppressing the frustration inside my stomach, I would yell at the soldiers reporting to me meaninglessly. That’s why I am venting it out first, Fuhaha!”

Perhaps his shouting made him feel better? General Akugarpa smiled in a much better mood. Lieutenant Colonel Michelin sighed — His supervising officer wasn’t a bad person, but his tongue is nasty and, worst of all, this wasn’t good for the heart.

“G… General Sir! Reporting in! I am terribly sorry for being late!”

Shortly later, a messenger appeared on horseback, quickly dismounted before the General and saluted. This soldier seemed to have heard that roar earlier by coincidence, and seemed to be fearing admonishment.

“Relax, you aren’t that late — How is it?”

“My apologies for failing to meet your expectations… But after searching, I couldn’t find a gap in the wall of fire that the army could advance through.”

“… Not a single spot? Not even a tiny gap?”

“It’s regrettable, but the fire wall in the forest is thicker than I imagined. As the fire was just set by the enemy there aren’t any obvious gaps in the burning rate of each zone. There probably would be gaps appearing because of the different rate of burning in another two to three days, but…”

The messenger braced himself to be yelled at and shut his eyes tightly. But contrary to his expectations, General Akugarpa answered in a calm tone:

“Alright, I understand. It must be hard on you and your men to have searched the entire time since midnight. Before any new orders come, take your men back to the unit and rest.”

After hearing these unexpected words of appreciation, the messenger was shocked, but returned to his senses and ran off after saluting. Lieutenant Colonel Michelin muttered:

“… It’s still no good huh?”

“I already expected this… But we have to give proper consideration on making a detour.”

That was what he said, but in reality Akugarpa already gave instructions in the morning to form a 1800 men detachment unit to take the detour route. Even without Jean’s advice, he wasn’t an indecisive General who would stay in place when faced with an impassable obstacle.

“Shhyyyaahh— That’s annoying! It’s a route we didn’t expect to take, and it would take a lot of time to change our direction of advance. Who knows what we might encounter on the path there!”

“I understand how you feel, but adapting to the situation is something normal on the battlefield.”

“Don’t give such textbook speech, it reminds me of the dogmatists in our country and makes me mad… Forget it, now is the time to make a decision. Since there is no other way, send the detachment to the detour route immediately—”

“— It’s still too early for that, how about waiting ten more minutes?”

A steadfast and kind voice filled with confidence came from behind. General Akugarpa and Lieutenant Colonel Michelin turned back, and saw a white haired youth standing behind them with one male and one female aide.

“So it’s the brat, I didn’t ask for you today.”

“Syah, that’s too naive. When you reach my standard, appearing without being summoned is possible too.”

"In the army, that's disobeying orders and arbitrary behavior. Lieutenant Miara Gin and Captain Taznyado Harrah are here too? All the Exchange Officers are here, just what are you guys trying to do?"

"I will report to you after the situation changes, but let's chat before that."

General Akugarpa frowned because of Jean's cryptic behavior. At this moment, he heard someone calling for him from behind. He turned back in astonishment, and found the messenger who left charging in at full speed.

"R… Reporting! The flames in the forest path right in front of us are weakening!"

"What did you say!?"

The General opened his eyes wide in surprise, but decided to confirm for himself. After seeing the commander and his deputy charge ahead, Jean's group followed them closely.

As they gradually approach the forest, the scorching heat and smog blew right in their faces. Without anything flammable in the area, the wide road served as a barrier against fire. That was why they could breath here without getting choked by the smoke.

However, a short distance up the gradual slope of the hill, they would reach a place where the twists and turns result in a drastic drop in the width of the path. From that spot onwards the ground was filled with easily flammable logs, and the burnt trees on the side of the road were also hot obstacles that stubbornly deny humans from invading — That's how it should be.

"… What is going on? The fire and smoke is subsiding, I can see the road on the other side."

General Akugarpa said, his expectations being off the mark. Just like what he said, compared to yesterday, the flames had been drastically weakened. The only place that were still burning brightly was a short stretch ten to twenty meters ahead of them. Further up, there were only ashes continuing to spew smoke vexingly. Everyone could see this scene clearly from across the fire.

"If it is just this much, I think we can extinguish it in a few hours if we send some men here…"

The messenger said with a doubtful face. Even though he agreed with this assessment, General Akugarpa still couldn't understand the situation before his eyes. The General frowned, turned and looked at Jean's group that was behind him.

"What is happening? The fire on the widest path is going to burn out, why is the enemy ignoring this?"

The white-haired officer answered with an angelic smile:

"Yah*, he obviously want us to pass through here."

"Hey bray, I'm not in the mood for jokes."

Thinking that Jean wasn't giving a straight answer, the General glared at him. However, Jean just shook his head slowly.

"Hah*, I am not speaking in jest, but let's make it easier to understand — the enemy don't want us to make the detour."

At this moment, General Akugarpa finally understood something in his head. He turned once again and stared at the forest path before him.

"Is this a trap?"

"It's too obvious for the enemy to call it a trap. Calling it a lure… would be more adequate."

"I don't care what it's called! Anyway, what you are saying is that the enemy intentionally left a gap in their firewalls to make us stay here and dissuade us from detouring, correct?"

After Jean nodded silently, the General of the Holy Army threw his head back suddenly and laughed.

"Shaahahaha! Just let us make the detour to stall for a few more days would be enough, but the Imperial forces are really greedy! —Hey! Michelin!"

"Sir!"

"Dismiss the detachment that is supposed to head down the detour path, and post them back to their original units. Also, send pioneers to extinguish the fire here. They can cover it with dirt or douse them with pee, I don't care what they do as long as the fire is put out as quickly as possible."

"— Yes Sir, I will make get it done."

Lieutenant Colonel Michelin turned and dash back to headquarters after getting his orders. Jean watched him go with the corner of his eyes, then said suddenly with a serious expression:

"— General, I need to tell you something. If you start putting out the fire now, it would be night by the time you finish."

When he heard the reminder from Jean, General Akugarpa looked up at the sky with a stern face.

"… Probably. The sun is rather far towards the west now."

"Syah*, it will turn into a night assault against enemy grounds. Please understand the disadvantage of this situation."

The accusation was spot on. The General crossed his arms in thought.

"… We could push the time back too. Instead of attacking immediately after dousing the fire, how about doing so at dawn tomorrow?"

"As expected of you to be calm enough to consider this point. However, you probably need to attack despite knowing that launching a night assault is disadvantageous."

"Why?"

"Because the enemy will seal the route with fire if we don't attack before dawn. I don't think the Imperial army would accept a disadvantageous battle while being outnumbered with their primary mission being to stall for time."

"… You mean we will lose the chance to attack if we are afraid?"

"There are probably no other choice but to take the bait and fight them. Even so, it doesn't change the fact that the situation is in our favour. They will be done for if they lose once, but even if we don't win, we just need to think about our next course of action."

General Akugarpa accepted this and nodded. At this moment, Jean suddenly drew close and whispered:

"I have a suggestion, instead of probing about as we attack…"

Jean whispered quietly, and the knot on the brows of the General deepened as he listened.

"No, I can't approve that."

"Hah*… I understand the heavy implications behind the religious taboos, but please…"

"The fact that you are saying that means you don't understand the value behind what is forbidden. Think about it carefully, aside from you people being the exceptions, the ten thousand soldiers in my army are all Aldera believers. And their faith is so strong that they are willing to devote their lives to a jihad."

"Syool*! I understand this completely from the high morale of the troops."

"That's right. However, looking from the opposite perspective, this mean that the army is reliant on this. The only thing I can count on for our army that have not experience live battles for a long time would be our morale. Our training lacks far behind the Imperials. That is why the morale of the troops must absolutely not drop— Hence, I cannot permit any actions that would shake the foundation of our morale."

General Akugarpa said firmly with a serious expression, and Jean seemed impressed as he answered with an "Oh."

"…Mum*, I am completely convinced with no grounds to protest — This might sound rude, but compared to two years ago, you have changed quite a bit, General. You are actually looking objectively at faith as an element to shore up combat potential… That honestly surprises me."

"You don't have the right to say that. This is the result of your education, Mr Military Consultant.

Introducing the Kioka way of thinking and letting it seep into Aldera— That should be one of your missions."

General Akugarpa stared at the three of them as if he was watching a comedy. Jean nodded without any hint of guilt.

"To think that you can understand without needing us to bring it up, this is a huge step in improving the relations of both countries."

"Is that what you really think? As long as you all don't stop your schemes, getting along would just be a nonsensical dream… I am not sure if you are aware, but sometimes, the smiles of the Kiokas look as thin as paper."

After saying his piece, General Akugarpa turned and left too. Jean's group kept some distance as they followed, and spoke softly to each other.

"It has always been like this, but negotiating with religious people is such a pain."

"Nyatt*! That's not true, Miara. General Akugarpa is very smart, and his thinking is flexible despite his age. And compared to the priests in the church, he has the vision to see the true nature of things. For me, this is just preparation before I request him to accept something else. That way, he will find it hard to reject me when I ask again in the future."

"Jean, you are the one who nurture his comprehensive capability. It is good for him to be comfortable with the Kioka way of thinking, but if he is good enough to read us, wouldn't that be bad in a lot of ways?"

Captain Harrah shared his justified concern. For an instance, the 'paper thin smile' vanished completely from Jean's face.

"… Reading our hidden intent, seeing through our thoughts and deducing further things from that… These are the basics of negotiations. If a country couldn't do this much, then their diplomatic abilities would take the childish stance of calling for the destruction of the old theologist."

His words started getting emotional, and a drop of fresh blood dripped from his clenched fist.

"Even though it has political value, I don't want to acknowledge the existence of such a nation. Stubbornly announcing their extremist views and persistent in war after war. In the end, there wouldn't be victors or losers left on the chessboard, only mountain of corpses would remain— Having such a tragedy happening once is more than enough. You understand? It's already too many, Harrah."

"… I understand Jean. I spoke too lightly."

Noticing that he stepped on a landmine, Captain Harrah took back his words. This was probably enough to satisfy him as Jean's face reverted to his usual kind smile.

"—Yah*, then let's make preparation for the night. It would be best if we can settle this without taking the field, but I don't think such a good thing would happen. That's what my instinct tells me—Or rather, that's what I would want."

"Well then, I will place my bets on us not needing to take the field. After all, it has been a long time since I last saw disappointment on Jean's face."

Miara replied mischievously, and Harrah smiled too. The white-haired officer pouted as he looked at his two subordinates unhappily.



*

The sun set beyond the horizon and night fell. The remnant night light gradually faded from the western sky, making it a beautiful yet anxious moment. However, many imperial soldiers ushered in this moment in the forest filled with smoke and heated air.

So hot. I'm the one who set the fire, but this is like a boiling pot in hell.

Ikuta was annoyed by the sweat that kept coming out from his neck no matter how many times he wiped it, as he muttered the things everyone else was thinking in his heart.

It is hard to breathe. This might be better than breathing in smoke, but my brain feels dull because of the lack of oxygen.

All the soldiers had put on makeshift masks made from cloth of delicate quality, or rather, the lower half of their faces was covered in a protective mask. Just doing this would make people wonder how effective it was against poisonous fume released from half burned materials. But the fact it could suppress the sound of coughing from numerous soldiers was enough to justify its value.

Behind him was complete darkness, and in comparison, the field of vision before them was much better. After all, the moonlight illuminated the area and they are positioned in the forest, looking onto the road. The opposite was true for the enemy, it was advantageous for the imperials hiding in the dark.

It had been quite a while since the noise of the workers putting out the fire stopped. The enemy would appear any time now.

He unconsciously exerted strength onto the weapon in his hand, and he felt a sharp pain near the wound on his missing finger. He bit his lips to endure the pain, the luminous sprite attached to his bowgun sensed the tension from its master, and looked at Ikuta with concern. Ikuta responded with his gaze "I'm fine".

You are really an optimist, you think you can win?

Ikuta felt the illusion of someone whispering beside him, but he was wrong. The voice came from himself.

——How foolish. Since the fire line of defense is working, shouldn't you be satisfied with just that? Why stop the enemy if they want to detour, just watching them go in relief would be fine right? It would be a bargain to stop them for four to five days. Even if you didn't stop the detour, you already did all you could in stalling 12,000 men with 600 troops. That's all you need to excuse yourself.

That seemed to be the core of his persona speaking, and the content was really harsh. Ikuta felt stupid for doing so, but he still refuted himself.

If the main forces behind us fail to retreat, the entire north would fall into the hands of Aldera. What do you think will happen to the Empire then? On top of the Eastern region taken by Kioka, the Empire would be pressured by two nations to the north and the east! If it comes to this, it would be gg in strategic terms.

——This situation didn't start now right? Aren't you the one who assessed the current situation of the Empire to be 'on the last stage of a downhill decline'? You were planning to watch idly by in a safe place while the Empire head towards destruction, but when you've come to your senses, you are standing at the forefront and preventing this situation from happening. What kind of joke is this?

The youth gritted his teeth. In order to silence the voice in his heart, he churned his rational mind for a counter argument.

That is an unfortunate development, everything here is. After I did my best to protect my comrades and subordinates, I am already at the front line when I realized it. It's the same now, I am doing this to allow everyone to return alive.

—— So this is the result? A battalion of 600 men and 120 Shinaak combatants against the 12,000 strong Holy Aldera Army? Ara, what a great plan.

I don't think the chances of winning is low. We will be attacking the very moment the enemy enter this narrow path, and it is a night ambush. More than enough to make up for the disadvantage in numbers.

—— Is that what the textbooks say? A newly minted Warrant Officer brat, having the confidence that doesn't match your station. I don't think that is so, but do you think you are a once in a thousand years genius because you survived all this while due to luck?

From the simulation battle with Captain Sarihasrag to the battles I have fought so far, I have always achieved passing grades. This isn't overconfidence, it is proof that my skill in using troops can be used practically.

—— Oh, that poor first born son of House Remeon! If you think defeating that man is proof of your abilities, that mean you have regressed. Think about it calmly. Are you hoping that the officers of the Holy Aldera Army you will be facing will just be a little more capable than that guy? ——There's a limit to how optimistic you can be, don't forget what Yatori told you.

His breathing turned ragged as his heart raced. Before he even faced the enemy, the youth already forced himself into a corner.

—— The 21 years old Major sent as an exchange officer by Kioka to the Holy Aldera Army as a military consultant. Maybe that man is the true genius of this era. If the princess knew him, maybe she wouldn't need to convince you. If that is so, it is finally time for your layer of gold to peel off ——

"Shut up, stop nagging about something that is just a mere possibility."

Ikuta used a soft but firm voice to forcibly suppress the words in his heart. Most of the soldiers didn't hear it, only Suya besides him shot him a strange look.

Sorry, it's nothing.

Ikuta used his eyes to send this message, even though Suya still look doubtful, she didn't pursue the matter. Ikuta sighed out in relief, then took a few deep breathes nonchalantly.

His hastened breathing and heartbeat slowly turned normal — and when he almost completed this movement, the sound of countless foot steps from nearby stirred the youth's ear drums.

They are here.

This was the other side of the forest where Ikuta, Matthew and Nanak were standing by with 300 odd troops. The enemy was just about to turn in the meandering forest path. Yatori and Torway, along with 200 soldiers hid their presence in a position where they could launch a pincer attack.

Numerous dark shadows entered her sights. With just the moonlight illuminating the night, it was impossible to see the numbers and equipment. But from the sound of the dense footsteps and the formation along the breadths of the road, there were clearly more than three battalions or 1,800 men. The scale was too large for a scouting unit.

This is a reconnaissance in force… No, judging from the the terrain constraint, this is all they could send in. Without clear knowledge of our numbers, this is a bold move…

That might be so, but even if the enemy sent a smaller scouting unit, Yatori and the others would exterminate them before they could send the intelligence back. If they did that, they wouldn't be able to complete their reconnaissance anyway, so the decision of the enemy general was praiseworthy.

Before fighting a large group of enemy, I wanted to engage a smaller number to prepare the troops' mentally. But things won't go as I wished in a real battle huh?

Yatori lamented the fact that things didn't go her way as she signalled the soldiers to raise their weapon.

Inside the barricades blocking the road were 22 wind cannons and artillery soldiers operating them, and guards made up of luminous infantry hiding behind cover. The commander, Captain Senpa Sazaruf was about 200m away and could make out the silhouette of the enemy.

We are within cannon range of each other, but the enemies aren't making any signs of firing at us. After all, a cannon battle would favour the side which is deployed on a higher ground. The enemies are probably not attacking since they're sure they would be counter attacked.

Even though he understood the theory, Captain Sazaruf still think that this is a bold and decisive way of thinking. Before sending in infantry, it was the basics to use cannon fire to open up a path. After disrupting the enemy formation as much as possible and grinding down their numbers, the real assault would then begin. That was the usual practice.

Forget it, we won't let them prepare their cannon in peace anyway.

Captain Sazaruf stopped observing the enemy from the gap of the barricades, then headed to the position where he could see the entire structure. As the overall commander, he was planning to order the attack — But he suddenly felt a chill and turned to his back.

Damn it, I can't help being bothered by this. Will those Phantom guys really not attack?

For Captain Sazaruf, the phantom unit that was still hiding in the mountains was a potential threat he had to watch out for at all times. If they interfere in the important battle that will decide the war, it might be the key leading to the Imperial's defeat.

The fact that he might be attacked from the rear bothered him a lot, making him lose focus, he even complain why there weren't eyes on the back of his head. However, Ikuta gave an advice to his superior——

"'The fear that they might be there' — That's the essence of the phantom unit, Captain."

Ikuta said to his superior officer who was accumulating mental stress from over vigilance.

"To keep us from making bold moves because of the fear of a sneak attack — Please treat this as part of the phantom unit's offensive… But don't worry, there is an effective medicine for this symptom."

After Ikuta finished, he took out his hands from his pockets and extended them towards the Captain. However, both of his palms were clenched.

"Please guess which side is holding a walnut."

Ikuta didn't give any further hints after saying that, so Captain Sazaruf had no choice but to brood with his arms crossed. After waiting for about 20 seconds, Ikuta opened his fingers gently.

His right hand was empty. There wasn't anything in his left either. Neither hands had a walnut.

"Do you get it now? Captain, the 20 seconds you wasted just now is the same thing as the 20 seconds you wasted on worrying about the phantom. Since there isn't any hints or information, there is nothing to be gained from worrying about something we can't see. This is not scientific at all."

Captain Sazaruf stared at the empty hands and groaned as Ikuta continued with a fearless smile:

"Even though their name is the phantom unit, their real identity is just a group of humans with legs and bodies. In that case, it would be impossible for them to hide from the surveillance of our allies positioned all over the mountain and attack us. They will show themselves before they could reach us, we just need to wait for that chance and—"

When he recalled those words, the chill on Captain Sazaruf's back seem to weaken and he looked to the front once again.

I'm not going to think about it! It will be a shame at my age to be afraid of ghost!

Captain Sazaruf smiled wryly as he focused his attention on the situation before him with renewed vigor. In the dark forest path, the enemy was close enough that he couldn't ignore them anymore.

How can we let the chance for a preemptive attack slip?

After steeling himself, Captain Sazaruf breathed hard to fill his lungs with air, and gave the orders to the luminous infantry under his command.

"— Beams on! Begin the battle!"

The blinding light swept the darkness from two different angles. One came from the barricades right in front of the enemy, the other came from Ikuta's unit hiding in the forest. The enemy who were just shadows turned into clear silhouettes, and the fearful figures of the army were illuminated clearly.

""""""Fire!""""""

The commanders gave the orders, and countless bolts and bullets rained onto the group, along with 22 cannon rounds. The light and sound that destroyed the enemy sight and hearing poured in like a torrent, and the battle began.

"Damn it! Such an astonishing number right from the start…! I did expect this but…!"

The noise threatening to burst their ear drums contrasted deeply with the silence a few seconds ago. Matthew and his soldiers raised their air shooters and shot at the enemy before them.

The sound of the compressed air exploding overlapped with each other, and the enemy whose flanks were hit by lead bullets fell one after the other. The gun unit led by Torway was on the other side of the road, forming a pincer attack on the enemy.

"Tsuu! Be careful not to choke!"

Matthew took a bullet from the pouch on his waist and stuff it into the mouth of his sprite. As his partner was loading and compressing air, Matthew used the time to aim. After completing the actions, he squeezed the trigger of the air shooter, then repeated the entire process.

He didn't even have the time to rest for a second. If Torway and his gun unit don't keep cutting down the enemy numbers, the barricades that were right before the enemy would be overwhelmed.

"Phew…!"

Torway felt the same pressure. On top of that, they had the new weapons, air rifles, so he felt a strong obligation to contribute the result to match.

"I have to defeat more… more enemies! While Ikuta is helping to attract the enemy's attention!"

The distance could no longer be called sniping, and Torway's reluctance to shoot 'living beings' raised its ugly head again. But he suppressed his emotions and the bullets he fired hit the temple of the enemy soldier right on target. He had fired twelve consecutive shots, and had not missed a single time.

In the corner of Torway's eyes, he could see numerous lights sparkling as it moved— Right now, Matthew and his air shooter unit were firing continuously with almost no retaliatory fire. That was because the luminous infantry led by Ikuta was drawing the enemy's attention.

In order to aim at the enemy, a light source was needed. Shining a light at such a situation was the same as telling the enemy your position, and draw retaliatory fire. If they were counterattacked when they fire, run and shake off the enemy before firing again… Right now, they couldn't afford the leisure

of doing so. In such a battle, the gun unit should ideally stay in the same spot and fire continuously.

That was why they needed a unit to 'shine a light' and 'feint'. In this battle, Ikuta's 80 men unit fulfilled this role. They hid in the forest and ran around on the path, shining their lights from a position far away from other units, illuminating the enemy while drawing their attention. When they were fired upon, they would hide in cover, and continue shining when the shooting subsides. Repeating these actions helped to shift the attack focus of the enemy away from their allies.

"Everyone listen up, the highest priority is to snipe the enemy who noticed us, second would be anyone attacking the feinting unit! If we lose them, we will lose our chance to shoot undisturbed! Don't forget that!"

Torway didn't stop his hands as he issued this order to his subordinates and kept shooting. The exploding sound of compressed air erupted rhythmically like a precise machine, echoing continuously on the battlefield.

*

"Wow, the counter attack is really intense!"

The General of the Holy Aldera Army, Akugarpa Sa Domeisha stood in the forest about 300m from the barricades with his numerous guards.

"I can't see clearly from here… Shyaa—! This is tormenting me! Hey Michelin! Can't we go nearer!"

"This is already the limit, didn't you saw cannon rounds falling just 10m from here?"

His deputy advised calmly. As they were positioned at a turn right before the approach to the barricades, they didn't need to worry about stray bullets. But on the other hand, they couldn't observe the battle from this place. It was only natural for the General commanding the army to be positioned here, but Akugarpa kept complaining.

"I understand how you feel, General. But the era where the general of an army would lead the charge is long gone."

Jean who came over with Miara joined the faction that was persuading their commanding officer. The General glared at Jean's friendly smile for a moment, then spat on the ground in obvious displeasure.

"Forget it! Wait for the signal for the second wave! Is the siege ladder ready!?"

"Ready to go!"

General Akugarpa nodded satisfyingly after hearing his subordinate's answer.

"… After erecting 60 pillars, charge in. This is fine right, brat?"

"Yes. It doesn't look like an obstacle that couldn't be overcome with brute force, please proceed as

plan.”

The white-haired officer answered unwavering, with a faint arrogant smile on his face.

*

“A volley is coming! Take cover!”

When they heard Ikuta who gave the command as he hid behind a tree, his subordinates all complied immediately. The rain of lead showered onto them from the side just a moment later, one of the wood fragments bounced off Ikuta’s forehead.

“Suya! Check for casualties! Get it done in 20 seconds!”

“Ah… Yes Sir!”

As his deputy consolidate the reports from the squad leaders, Ikuta slowly poked his head out from behind the tree he was using as a shield to carefully observe the battlefield.

“… Against the enemy’s attack, we are holding our own quite well. The fire rate of the cannons is good, Matthew and Torway are performing well too. As for anything strange— …Hmm?”

Among the enemy casualties were a few strange objects. The few soldiers who could survive their charge and made it near the barricade were ramming wooden logs into the ground. And these logs were about as big as a woman’s waist.

“Are those shields against bullets? I see, the goal of the first wave is to put up those logs… The opponent is going with a more orthodox route than expected. We better throw out the prejudice that they are an army that lacked battle experience.”

As Ikuta were furrowing his brows in awe of the enemy, Suya completed her check and reported:

“Lieutenant, reporting! There are 3 casualties, I sent them to the rear! Our unit have 73 men left!”

“Yes, got it — This position is at its limit, we have to move. We need to focus our lights on those guys pinning the logs onto the ground, remember that.”

“Yes Sir!”

Encouraged by the crisp reply, Ikuta once again ran in the forest. He was exhausted, but he couldn’t use that as an excuse to slow down. The scales of the battle wasn’t leaning towards either side yet.

After Ikuta noticed the logs, about ten minutes or so, the number of logs entrenched were enough for Captain Sazaruf to see its effects visibly.

“Those logs are in the way… They are blocking the trajectory of the cannon rounds.”

Captain Sazaruf who was watching the situation from the barricade clicked his tongue. If the deeply entrenched logs that was in the way of the cannon rounds were spread out, it wouldn't affect the bombardment much. However, the enemy was planting them in a tight formation, so they were supporting each other, and it was growing into a screen that couldn't be ignored. As the logs were reinforced with ropes tied to sand bags, the rounds that hit there would ricochet off. As a result, there would be occasional rounds that were fired, but fail to deal any damage.

"4th cannon and 17th cannon, shift your angle 2 degrees to the left! Avoid firing at the logs!"

He gave the order to deal with the problem at hand, but the Captain knew very well, that this wouldn't solve the root of the problem. The issue right now was that the enemy were forming safe zones along their route of advance by entrenching these logs.

"Just these number of logs is enough to form a shield, if they continue planning more logs… Is the enemy planning to use them as cover, so they could increase the number of soldiers that could charge the barricade?"

I can't let the enemy get their way…Captain Sazaruf muttered. But he didn't have any concrete counter measures. In order to pull out the entrenched logs, they would need to send pioneers in… But was that possible in such an intense battle?

"Captain! I have something to report!"

Yatori ran to Captain Sazaruf with an urgent air about her, the Shinaak tribal chief Nanak Dar was also beside her. At this moment, the Captain could already guess what she wanted.

"Hey! Let us engage them in close quarter combat! And use the chance to pull out the annoying logs!"

"As expected… To be honest, I am hesitant about it. It's too early, we should delay the dangerous melee charges as far back as possible."

"If we make the decision too late, it would result in a danger to our lives. These logs are probably a setup for the second wave of attack. Please look at the logic behind their positioning. Instead of providing cover for the infantry, don't you think they want to avoid our fire and bring something big in?"

This speculation sent a chill down Captain Sazaruf's back— Just from the limit of his knowledge, he could think of several candidates for the large object that the enemy might bring in such a situation.

"But if you go in for close quarter combat, we need to stop the cannons…"

"No, don't need for that. But in place of that, please fire the cannon at a higher angle. That way, the rounds will fly over our heads, and there wouldn't be any problem pulling out the logs down below."

If it could reduce the pressure from the enemy, and done in a way that the artillery soldier won't misaim, this was a good plan indeed. After brooding it for a while, the Captain gave in under the intense gaze of the two women.

"… I understand, go on then. However, don't push yourself. That includes you too, Nanak Dar."

Nanak averted her face with an expression that says 'mind your own business'. Captain Sazaruf expected such a reaction and shrugged, and then turned towards the barricade.

"After we pull the angle of the cannon high enough, I will get a luminous trooper to send a signal. The pulling of the logs should start from the front left. I will raise the angle on three cannons at the same time, so coordinate your movements accordingly."

"Yes Sir!"

"However, you two absolutely can't go beyond 100m in front of the cannons. It is too close to the enemy, and you might get hit by friendly fire. Ignore the logs in that area — that's an order, now go!"

The two acknowledged their orders and ran to their waiting subordinates without turning back. Captain Sazaruf watched their backs as they left, and muttered a prayer: "Don't die on me."

When Ikuta saw Yatori and Nanak's unit appeared in the middle of the intense battle zone, he slapped his forehead with a wry smile.

"I knew you two would do that… There are really a lot of brave warrior women among my close friends."

He mumbled as he loaded a bolt into his nooked bowgun. His subordinates, with Suya as taking the lead, also did the same. At this moment, Ikuta suddenly spoke to his deputy:

"That includes you too, Suya."

"Please… don't say it like you just remembered, and added me in after the fact. And I didn't ask anyway…"

"Ahaha, you are right… The top priority would be supporting Yatori's unit and the Shinaaks. In order to lower the danger they face, we have to do everything we can."

After hearing Ikuta's instruction, his subordinates all nodded. The group avoided the bullets coming at them from the sides, and started moving in the forest at the same time.

"Haahhhhhh!"

Fresh blood spurted from the slit necks of the enemy. After changing her weapon from a bowgun with an attached bayonet to her favourite dual blades, Yatori and her subordinates engaged the enemy assaulting them, displaying their prowess and bravery.

"Keep your guard up! Once they see that the firing angle of the cannons had been adjusted, they will charge us!"

In the face of the enemy's attack, Yatori and those holding on to their weapon protected the pioneers who were digging desperately with spades to unearth the logs. They were performing construction work in the middle of the battlefield.

And of course, it wasn't an easy task. Pulling out the deeply entrenched logs not only require intensive labour, but would also be targeted by the enemy trying to stop them.

"How shameless of you! You dare step into our holy mountains with your stinking feet!?"

With a Kukri in each hand, Nanak fended off the enemy together with the Shinaak warriors. They didn't know formations and military matters well, but in a chaotic melee, the Shinaak's performance wasn't inferior to the regular Imperial soldiers.

"Nanak Dar! You are too deep! It is hard to support you, don't charge in on your own!"

"Who cares, red one! I never counted on your help anyway!"

But the problem was, the two units lacked teamwork. Nanak commanded her unit solely by her judgement, and ignored Yatori's warning. In the end, the pace of the field work was uneven, and only the Shinaaks stuck out towards the enemy.

"Commander, this is a good chance! The enemy is withdrawing from their attack!"

One of her soldier yelled. Yatori turned her gaze to confirm, and found the number of soldiers charging the barricade had dropped drastically. This was undoubtedly a good chance to carry out field work, but she couldn't feel happy about it.

"How strange, why are they retreating at such a time… Aren't the enemy adamant about about their attack?"

Yatori felt ominous and stopped the soldiers who wanted to charge forth, and observe the situation carefully. However, Nanak seemed to have appraised this opportunity at face value, and led her troops towards the logs in the distance.

"Stop right there! Nanak Dar! The enemy is acting strange! Don't go too far!"

"Hmmp! Getting cold feet at the critical moment!? Red one, you can just wait there then!"

Nanak wasn't concerned, and the distance between the two units grew further. Yatori was hesitating about giving chase despite the danger, but she suddenly saw what was happening some distance behind the retreating enemy.

About 200m away, a group of wind gun soldiers formed a horizontal rank. The front row knelt and the second row stood. Of course the enemy was retreating. This wasn't a formation for a charge, but for staying in place and firing their weapons.

"What are they scheming? Even if they fire from that distance, it won't have much effect with the

range of a wind gun—"

Midway through her thoughts, Yatori suddenly realized something. The uniform of the enemy forming the ranks — It was hard to see clearly without much light, but the uniform was obviously different from the soldiers they fought so far. When that shade of green matches the one in her memory, Yatori shouted at Nanak who was before her:

"— No! Fall back, Nanak Dar! That position has been targeted!"

The warning was in vain as the ten odd Shinaak warriors at the very front fell.

*

"Don't stop! Continue firing!"

On Captain Taznyado Harrah's command, the Kioka soldiers squeezed their trigger in unison.

The sound of multiple compressed air explosion erupted. The new weapon in their hands — The Air Rifles fired mercilessly as the powerful rounds pelted the Shinaak warriors 200m away.

"Yah*, that timing is splendid."

Jean and Miara watched the scene from slightly behind them. Relative to the safe zone where General Akugarpa was waiting in, they were 30m further to the front.

"Jean, duck! The counter attack is coming!"

The moment after Jean squatted down, the sound something ripping through the air passed above his head. This was the retaliatory attack of the Imperial gun unit. On a closer look, several men from Captain Harrah's gun group were shot.

Jean kept one knee onto the ground and mummered:

"…Mum*, that is a solid counter. We have to assume that the enemy are armed with air rifles too. They should be positioned slightly to the right of the center, on higher grounds… Near those woods? Look, right there—"

Seeing that her superior didn't learn his lesson and was attempting to stand, Miara grabbed Jean's head and push him down.

"You just need to speak with your mouth, don't be careless and raise your head— There shouldn't be the technology to craft air rifles on the Imperial side correct?"

"Professor Anarai who created this technology was originally a researcher from the Empire. He probably have students there too, so it wouldn't be strange if the Empire is also developed the air rifle."

As Jean were making his deduction, he could see over the shoulders of the soldiers that the gun unit had broken up their formation and was coming back. The 200 men returned to their columns and hid on either side of the road. The tall figure of Captain Harrah left the unit and ran straight to the white-haired officer.

"— I completed the assigned task, the enemy is busy ferrying their casualties."

"Yah!*Before they could transport all their wounded to the rear, the enemy would not be able to revert the firing angle of their cannons— Thank you, Captain Harrah. Now things can finally move forward."

After Jean said that with a wide grin, he stood up cooly and turned to his back. To save the time needed to send a messenger over a mere 30m, he shouted directly at General Akugarpa behind him:

"This is a great chance! General, please send in the siege ladder!"

*

A large number of enemy troops pushed a hybrid between a wagon and a ladder up the slope. Ikuta and his subordinates watched this scene as they hid in the forest.

"They are sending out siege ladders here…!"

Siege ladders were siege weapons that allow soldiers to scale and overcome forts and castles. A folding ladder were built onto a wagon, which would be deployed when they reached the obstacle. It had the function of avoiding the strong points of the fort and let the infantry break into enemy grounds.

"… This is terrible timing. There are casualties in the line of fire, so the effects of the cannons are still at half strength."

Other than the few cannons with its angle tilted up, another half of the cannons couldn't fire because the Shinaaks were spread out chaotically from the unexpected rifle attack. The enemy was trying to use this chance to push their siege ladders all the way to the barricade.

— What should I do?

This wasn't a situation that could be influenced by shining lights and feinting attacks. From the number of enemy escorting the siege ladders, providing supporting fire from forest cover would have little effect… In the case, going back to the barricade and taking part in the defensive battle would be the right choice.

— But if I do that, what would happen to our Shinaak allies… to Nana?

He felt a stab of pain from his missing pinkie finger. That was the problem. Yatori's unit was positioned closer to the barricade, and should be able to flee behind the barrier before the enemy attack. However, that wasn't so for Nanak's group. They would receive a second wave of attack in the middle of the intense battle zone with large numbers of casualties in tow.

— What should I do to avoid that?

The only thing Ikuta could do was commit his own forces into melee battle. He could only lead his luminous unit that was originally 80 strong, and had dwindled down to less than 70, into the fray to help their comrade that was in danger.

In other words, this was a typical two choose one. Should he aid them despite the risk? Or adopt the safer strategy and abandon them? Ikuta couldn't help recalling the choice he had to make in the past.

— During that time with Kanna, I chose to abandon her.

He only knew the people he abandoned included Kanna after the fact, but that didn't matter. She died in the end, in a terrible manner of being turned into a pincushion. For Ikuta, that was the truth being it all.

— Don't be perplexed, there are only two factors to consider. The strategically sound option of helping them? Or the tactically correct choice to save myself?

Ikuta shook off the memories of those who had passed, pushing his emotions aside to make his judgement… Strategically speaking, he should help the Shinaaks as much as possible. Led by their tribal chief Nanak Dar, the defence line was only possible because of their existence. Their assistance would be indispensable from now on too.

Tactically speaking, what were the chances of saving them — very slim. Even if things went well, Ikuta could predict that there would be heavy losses. And that was assuming that he would be working in concert with Yatori—

"… Ah, what am I doing. It is that Yatori, it's meaningless to brood over this right?"

Ikuta noticed something simple, and left all the thinking he had done behind. He felt that his roundabout way of thinking was wasteful as he turned to his men and ordered:

"This might be sudden, but hide and seek is over — every one fix bayonets!"

When Nanak realized her mistake, a horde of enemy was already right before her. She wielded her sword like a windmill to intimidate the enemy as she fended them off to protect her comrades.

"C… Chief…! Leave us and run! You will die too…!"

A Shinaak man who was shot in the leg by the earlier volley yelled. However, the young chieftain turned and cut down the soldier who was charging in to deal the final blow.

"If you have the time to bring up this nonsense, then crawl your way out — I will not leave here before that!"

Nanak who was covered in the blood of her enemy declared stubbornly… Amongst the 120 Shinaak warrior she led, more than 30 of her tribesmen were either dead or incapacitated by the volley just

now. As the enemy was attacking en masse while they were transporting their wounded, they were forced to fight such a defensive battle.

“Ugghh! There is no end to this…! …Ugh! What… What is that?”

Wagons loaded with ladders were moving amongst the infantry, heading one after another towards the barricade. As Nanak’s group was a blindspot for the cannons, the enemy was pushing siege ladder up this route too. A huge number of enemy ran around them, and the soldiers around the wagon all attacked at once.

“Ugh! You lot…!”

As the Shinaak warriors fell one by one before the tide of enemy soldiers, Nanak’s struggle was also reaching her limits. She had been identified as the commander, and the enemy sent 8 men to surround her, aiming at her with their bowgun.



I can’t parry all the attacks— Nanakshrink away, imagining her entire body being hit by arrows. But

at that moment, reinforcement intercepted with a strong beam of light. The light that came from the side blinded the enemies, and they fell from the bolts that followed.

“Nana, are you alright!?”

She turned towards the familiar voice and saw Ikuta Solork holding a bowgun with a bayonet attached, leading a unit over. Nanak was about to show an expression of relief, but stopped and shouted urgently instead:

“Watch out Ikuta! There are enemies behind…!”

Maybe they were too focused on helping their allies, none of them watched their backs. A group targeted their defenceless rear and charged in, Nanak’s warning was drowned by the noise too. In the end, Ikuta’s and the others was about to receive an attack on their backs without being able to respond to it—

“Hah!”

— In the nick of time, the soldiers led by the flame haired girl arrived and drove the enemy away in his stead.

“What—”

What happened next was beyond Nanak’s understanding — in the battle where the bullets were flying about, Ikuta and Yatori’s led their unit to engage the enemy before them. As for the threat from behind, they left it to each other as if they had planned it beforehand.

“Form ranks! Protect the right flank of the casualties!”

“Form ranks! Defend the left side of our allies!”

The two commands were given almost simultaneously, and both of them made up for the inadequacies of each other. They splitted their task perfectly to expel the enemy around them, reorganized their formation on the fly to adapt to the situation, and the combat prowess of the two units gradually merged.

Instead of a human organization, they looked closer to two gigantic organism working with great synchronization — No, even such an impression got overturned and renewed. Not two organisms, it was more adequate to describe them as ‘the right and left hand of one entity’.

““Yes— ! ””

At the end of their cooperation that was as good as a magic performance, the black and red officers stood with their back to each other in the middle of the battlefield. Up until now, they didn’t looked at each other, much less converse.

“We will retreat after 30 seconds.”

“Pull back as many casualties within this time.”

They only said this much before separating and going to work. Ikuta ran to Nanak who was standing in a daze, helped the injured Shinaak beside her to stand and said to her:

“Nana, you help too! Bringing even one more injured would help!”

“Ahh…. Right…!”

Nanak forcibly changed her mindset, even though her thoughts couldn’t keep up with what she was seeing, and lent her shoulder hurriedly to an injured. They finished pulling back anyone who was still breathing in the next 30 seconds, and retreated immediately in unison.

At this moment, 3 of the siege ladders had been mounted onto the barricade, and the defending soldiers were fighting a deadly battle with the invading enemies.

“Damn it! Don’t come up! Don’t come up! Don’t come up here!”

“Do not let them get in! If we don’t stop them here, our entire army will collapse!”

“E… Even so! There’s too many of them…!”

Although the soldiers defending the barricade used bolts and bullets against the enemy climbing the ladders, and thrust their bayonets at those who scaled to the top, they were still pushed to a dire state. After sending out the siege ladders, their foes showed no signs of waning, and the number of enemies scaling the ladders were increasing.

“Tch! This is the limit…!”

Captain Sazaruf finally squeezed these words out… This was a hastily built barricade after all, its height and toughness was far from the passing standards. He knew from the very beginning that this place would fall into danger the moment the enemy began their assault.

“So the lack of teamwork with the Shinaaks is the weak point… Damn it, even though I expected that before hand.”

Captain Sazaruf reflected on his responsibility as a commander deeply, and was forced to make the decision to push the planned schedule ahead.

“Brats, come back quick! Judging from the situation, it would be difficult to wait for even 3 minutes…!”

The Captain groaned as he bit his thumbnail. When he thought about how heavy his decision to ‘abandon’ would be if the time ever comes, he couldn’t help praying to the regional god Alderamin for just this one time.

But thankfully, the time he waited as if his stomach was grinding swords bore fruit. After receiving

the signal from outside, the troops on the inside shifted the logs blocking the left corner of the barricade. The soldiers who survived the intense battle poured in from there.

“Captain, we are back! Is the battle line at its limits?”

Ikuta who charged back shouted. After seeing that Yatori and Nanak behind him were unharmed, Captain Sazaruf sighed in relief, he responded in a loud volume:

“That’s right, we are waiting for you all to return! Hurry and retreat!”

“Understood! What about Matthew and Torway’s wind gun unit?”

“They already fell back! You lot are the last!”

A unit of 40 odd soldiers passed by Ikuta’s group, carrying a pail full of liquid in pairs as they approached the barricade. When they were close enough, the soldiers splashed the barricade made of wood with the slightly viscous contents of the pails. Afterwards, they quickly rushed back to get another pail, and they repeated the same process.

“Alright, fire all the cannons at the same time! The defending soldiers will use this signal to retreat! — open fire!”

In response to the command, the 22 wind cannons fired simultaneously, intimidating the enemy that were assaulting the barricade en masse momentarily. The Captain didn’t let the chance slip and ordered:

“Now is the time — light it up!”

The fire soldiers who prepared ahead of time threw their torches at the same time, the barricade that was soaked in rapeseed oil bursts into flame in an instant.

“Begin the retreat! Lieutenant Yatorishino’s fire troops will be the rear guard! Burn the flammable contraptions as you withdraw! The medical troops in the rear should have started the burning process, but they have left the space for us to pass through! Listen up, do not take the wrong path!”

*

“—Hah*, it’s too late. We failed to capture it.”

The moment the barricade caught fire when the siege ladder finally got onto it, Jean Arkinex immediately realized… that the chance of his side breaking through the forest had been crushed.

“Hey brat, what did you say? What’s too late?”

General Akugarpa whose patience was at his limits came personally to the front lines where the bullets wasn’t flying since a few minutes ago. When he heard the question, Jean didn’t try to play it off this time and replied frankly:

“Before our soldiers broke through, the enemy had already set fire inside the barricade and started retreating.”

“I can see that, we just need to push our troops forward after the barricade is burned right? We have already won, isn’t it?”

“Nyatt*… We won’t be able to pursue in time. Right now, in front of us, the enemy is probably using fire to seal the forest path and then retreat. When the barricade finished burning, a fire wall would probably appear just like the one we saw yesterday.”

As if it was providing the evidence of his deduction, General Akugarpa noticed fire sprouting out from the other side of the barricade. After staring at the fire for quite a while, he gradually understood the situation, and the General’s shoulders started trembling.

“What—! What nonsense is this!? We worked so hard and finally got the upper hand!”

“Because we couldn’t extend our advantage. As the enemy had the option of burning the forest path to seal the road at any moment, they would do so when lose the advantage… However, that is easier said than done. For our opponent, the timing and calculation of doing that is very harsh. If it is too early, their allies scattered on the battlefield won’t be able to retreat; if they are too late, we will be able to break through. That’s what we are charging in one go with the siege ladders in order to disrupt that timing…”

“From the results, we are just one step away from breaking through. If five instead of three siege ladders made it to the barricades, we should be able to stop them from setting fire.”

Miara also gave her opinion calmly. General Akugarpa stomp his feet vexingly.

“Now what? That’s it for tonight? We suffered so many losses, but it will end without changing the situation…?”

Nyatt*! That’s not true! We didn’t achieve the best results, but we did make some progress.”

When he heard Jean’s words that felt completely insincere, the General of the Holy army responded with suspicious eyes. However, Jean explained fearlessly:

“The biggest result we got tonight is intelligence — The enemy might be commanded by an exemplary officer, but they number less than two battalions. Gauging from the losses we suffered, I am certain of that. There is no reason the enemy would hesitate in sending out their forces.”

“……”

“In fact, they are probably just a battalion +α, it can be deduced that the +α part is the Shinaak warriors, so the Imperial regular army has only one battalion.”

The white-haired officer explained fluently, even the disappointed general started listening to him.

“The losses on our side isn’t trivial, even if we add the heavily injured and the dead, our losses would be less than a thousand. In contrast, what about the enemy? Despite their brave efforts, they have loss about a hundred combatants. Do you understand? As the enemy numbered around 800, in terms of the overall ratio, the enemy suffered a heavier blow than us. There is a saying that ‘the few winning against the many is just a fantasy’ — We can tell from this famous saying that we won this skirmish.”

Seeing Jean going on and on elatedly, Lieutenant Colonel Michelin rebuked him dismissively:

“… Major Arkinex, that’s just sophistry. Even if we defeat the garrison unit here, our battle won’t end here. We still need to cross the mountain and attack the Northern Stronghold.

“Mum*, that’s true. But the main point is, we have not lost in anyway. It is true that the assault this time is a failure, but we didn’t lose anything. In other words, we can still keep up our aggressive attitude.”

‘The Bright Insomniac General’ said with an arrogant smile. Miara maintained her restrained attitude as Jean planned to display his gift of the gab further, and she thought —Jean’s word are imbued with magic.

He might not be telling the truth. A lot of the things he said would raise doubts, and he mixed in exaggeration and misinterpretation naturally. That was why he would sometimes give the impression of insincerity.

However, when they think about it after the fact, everyone would notice — Jean Arkinex wasn’t expressing the facts, but announcing what he would turn into facts.

*

Even the medical troops like Haroma who didn’t take part directly could tell how intense the battle was from the number of casualties that was sent to the field hospital.

As there was a tent to place the corpse, depending on how serious their condition was, some of the casualty might be sent there without going through the field hospital. Whenever a comrade just one step away from death got sent in, Haroma would be caught in fear, worrying if it was someone from the Order of Knights.

In such an environment, she didn’t feel she had done all she could for all the injured that was sent in. There were some heavily injured that was beyond help, but there were more who were on the verge of death. Haroma tended to nine of them. Four of them survived and five of them passed away. If she really did her best, the numbers might be reversed — Even though she knew it has already passed, she couldn’t help thinking that.

“… He just took his last breath.”

And now, Haroma announced the 6th deceased. The luminous infantryman who was hit in the chest by

a bullet was conscious and could hold a conversation when he arrived. But in the end, Haroma could only watch as he slowly fell into the darkness of death.

When she announced his death, Suya Mittokarifu who was on the other side of the body sobbed. This pained Haroma too. The soldier who just passed was a member of her unit. — from the 3rd training luminous platoon.

"How could this be… After Private First Class Azula and Sergeant Sicindy, even Corporal Ninika…"

They weren't the only ones, all units suffered casualties. For the 80 to 120 men units that acted individually, each of them had more than 10 death on average. The number jumped steeply for the Shinaak tribe which suffered 28 deaths and 33 heavily injured. It was fortunate that the Tribal chief Nanak Dar was unharmed, but their losses were really terrible.

"… I will report this to First Lieutenant Ikuta."

With her last comrade on the verge of death having passed on, Suya lost the person she had to encourage or bid farewell to. After seeing her salute and leave the tent that was almost overflowing with casualties, Haroma checked and saw there wasn't any casualties who needed emergency treatment before calling out to her.

"Please… Please wait, Sergeant Major Mittokarifu! Erm… I am planning to visit the headquarters tent later, if it is not too much trouble, want to go together?"

"… Yes, I understand, Lieutenant Becker."

Suya seemed to have taken Haroma's words as a command, and answered meekly with a salute. Even Haroma knew that this young female deputy of Ikuta was twice as emotional as others. Haroma could felt tense emotions from Suya's back as she was leaving with the obituaries, and couldn't leave her alone.

After the two of them left the tent together, they found the entire base camp filled with fatigue. The soldiers who had no assigned task to do sat weakly on the ground, not conversing with their comrades and keeping quiet. The scene of a large number of people gathering around the bonfire in silence, staring at the flames felt strange.

"It seemed that nobody could sleep… I think they are still too excited, I should brew some tea for everyone later."

"…... Oh…"

"During a time like this, it would be a relief if we have sugar. Because taking in something warm and sweet would be most effective when you are tired, I really wish the noble houses would spare us a sack of sugar."

"… Is that so…"

Suya replied absentmindedly, but Haroma didn't express unhappiness about it. It was fine even if she couldn't start a conversation as Haroma understood that there was no poison more terrible than silence for Suya right now.

Haroma talked one sidedly for quite some time and the two of them finally reached the headquarters tent in the middle of the base. After going in from the entrance, they found three person inside. Matthew and Torway sat opposite each other, performing maintenance on their rifles, while Captain Sazaruf was smoking a cigarette with his feet on the table at the innermost edge of the table.

"Sorry for intruding — Hmm! Everyone here look tired too."

Haroma intentionally spoke in a casual tone. Actually, she had always acted considerately, but did anyone in the army noticed?

"You might be saying that, but aren't you tired, Lieutenant Beckel? Don't hold back, sleeping on the grounds around here must feel comfortable too."

"Uughh… I hope there is at least a mattress… Speaking of which, I haven't seen Ikuta-san or Yatori-san. Ah, Nanak-san isn't here too."

"The three of them went to inspect the forest path. It would be bad if you miss each other. If you have some business with them, it would be better to wait here for a while."

Torway who noticed Ikuta's deputy was here gave his kind suggestion. Seeing Suya sat down in the chair he offered her, Haroma also picked an adequate and sat.

"Matthew-san, is your shoulder wound okay?"

Firstly, she spoke to the young man who didn't say anything yet. Matthew quietly took off his shirt that was draped over him like a cape, and gently placed his hand near his bandaged left shoulder.

"… How incredible, I didn't notice during the battle at all, and is just starting to feel the pain."

"Please refrain from touching your wound. That was a graze by a bullet, which left quite a deep wound."

"Just 5cm or so to the right, and it would have hit my face. Just thinking about that is enough to make me feel that it is a miracle I am still alive."

Matthew said as he push a stick with a cloth wrapped around it into the barrel of his air shooter, moving it to clean the dirt. It seemed that this practiced movements had become a safe haven for his soul.

"… This battle is different from the past."

He said in a low tone he had never used in the past:

“It is easy to differentiate. The battles in the past are ones we could win — and with an easy victory at that. We just need to follow Ikuta’s instructions, and we could suppress the enemy, surprisingly easy. As this had happened several times, to be honest, I think I underestimated war. It felt like, war isn’t that bad after all.”

After cleaning the inside of the barrel, he placed his partner onto it and let him send gentle wind through it. He used this action to clear any dust that might be inside the barrel.

“However, reality is different. I finally realized after suffering 11 deaths in my unit… This situation of kill or be kill is a real battle. And of course, in such a space, the possibility of me being killed exist too.”

After ending his speech with these words, Matthew picked up his stick and repeated the first step of his gun maintenance. His face was emotionless, as if he had given up on expressing them. He felt like a completely different person.

When Haroma was about to say something, Suya who was sitting besides her suddenly stood up.

“… I will take a look at the forest path.”

“Ah… But, if you don’t find them…”

Suya ignored Torway’s attempt to stop her, and left the tent in a half jog. Haroma was hesitating about getting up when Torway gave her a push.

“It’s fine here, so go, Ms Haroma. She seemed to be acting weird.”

I will take care of Matthew — After realizing what Torway was implying, Haroma left the tent with gratitude… However, Suya seemed to have been running seriously right after coming outside, the figure of her back was getting smaller. Haroma chased her in a panic.

They didn’t need to run too far.

Compared to before the battle, the raging flames on the forest path had been pushed back greatly, and is now less than a 100m from their base. As they approach gradually, they were greeted by the huge fiery light and intense heat.

“— Suya and Haroma? What do you need?”

Illuminated by the flames, the figure they were searching for appeared immediately. Ikuta immediately stopped his surveillance of the burning field, turned and walked towards them. For unknown reasons, Nanak was following behind him.

“Ah… I just wanted to check on everyone…”

“Sergeant Sicindy and Corporal Ninika is dead, Lieutenant Ikuta.”

Suya cut off Haroma, and threw the hard truths at her superior officer directly.

“In all, the unit commanded by the Lieutenant have 11 deaths, 6 of them were originally from the third training luminous platoon.”

“… Is that so.”

Ikuta only gaze downwards momentarily, but he didn’t waver any further and look back to his deputy.

“Thank you for your report. I will make the adjustment for our losses, have a good rest.”

“Is that all?”

Ikuta attempted to end the topic without any emotions, but Suya pressed on agitatedly, not allowing him to do so. Haroma who was besides her gasped. From the looks of things, the youth finally realized this woman was here to blame him.

“… I have acknowledged the report regarding the deaths, is there anything else, Suya?”

“I should be asking you, Lieutenant. Don’t you have anything to say to the subordinates who died because of your orders?”

Suya said with her fist clenched. Ikuta noticed what she was implying glanced at Nanak behind him with concern first, then turned back with a face of resignation.

“… You are referring to my decision to help the Shinaaks?”

Nanak’s shoulders twitched. It wasn’t clear if Suya noticed that as she pressed on:

“If we didn’t save them back then, we would suffer fewer casualties.”

“Yes, the price would be the annihilation of the Shinaaks.”

“Then let them! The root cause is that woman’s reckless charge anyway.”

She finally changed her target to Nanak, and the subject herself didn’t defend herself. Because it was an undeniable fact that she made an error in judgement, and Ikuta’s unit had to clean up after her.

“Sergeant Sicindy respects you greatly, Lieutenant. You know that?”

“… Yes.”

“Is that true? Ever since you defeated Captain Sarihasrag in that simulation battle, he has always been your supporter. We have an amazing commander, he will definitely become a big shot — when he gets drunk, he will always talk about that. Even though he is 9 years older than you, he will never skip the honorifics when addressing you. Do you know all that?”

"……"

"Corporal Ninika was my first subordinate when I became a Private First Class. As she was the only fellow woman in the platoon, I would take extra care of her. From using the bowgun, the key points during cleaning inspection, and how to sneak away when her period clashes with training… I taught her all that."

Suya who was speaking non stop like water gushing out of a broken dam was tearing up, even she herself couldn't stop the words from coming out from her mouth.

"Are you going to say that these comrades are the same as the Shinaaks whom we were fighting to the death with just yesterday? So it's only natural to risk our lives to save them, and accept it even if some of us dies? — Don't be ridiculous, how can I accept that!?"

Suya spilled out all her thoughts, and glared at Nanak as if she was her mortal enemy. However, when Ikuta was about to respond, a resolute voice interrupted:

"You are blaming the wrong person, Sergeant Major Mittokarifu."

Yatori who stopped her burning works swayed her vermillion hair that was clearly visible despite it merging with the background, and joined the argument. She accepted Suya's emotion that was bursting forth from her eyes and said:

"First, I have to clear your misunderstanding. The one who made the decision to save the Shinaak wasn't Ikuta."

"… You are lying. There was no way to communicate back then, our unit and Lieutenant Yatorishino's unit started moving in at almost the same time, we didn't move after seeing you move first. Back then, Lieutenant Ikuta made the call himself."

"That is true. But his decision was based on my action."

"… I don't understand what you mean, what is going on here?"

"When the Shinaaks fell into danger, Ikuta was certain that I would mount a rescue. As the rescue operation would require two units working in cooperation no matter what, my side took action on the basis that Ikuta would provide support. If our forces couldn't converge there, my unit would be dragged in and decimated. That was why Ikuta had no choice but to act."

As Suya listened to the explanation, her expression showed her failure to understand. Haroma was the same… What is 'the certainty that the other party would help the Shinaak, so he headed in to provide support'? And 'took action on the basis that he would provide support'? — Did this mean that the way they think was in sync?

"And so, this has nothing to do with the order events happened, I am the main person who decided the rescue, and Ikuta merely follow through on that decision. That is why, I should be the one who should be responsible for the losses for this action."

After Yatori directed all the accusations toward herself, she looked at Suya straight in the face. She had an air about her that demanded respected, no matter how agitated the person before her was.

"I want to make this clear with this premise in mind — In accordance to the decision made in the war council earlier, the Shinaaks are formally viewed as our allies. I don't think those are superficial words or excuses. Therefore, I do not regret my decision to aid them when they fell into danger."

"This rationale…! We have to protect the enemy we had to kill yesterday as if they are our comrades — You think our feelings can keep up with such chaotic orders!?"

"I know how you feel. But in the military, orders requires those who execute it to seal off their own emotions. As a soldier, everyone would be forced to carry out orders that goes against their own values to a certain extent. We have to treat them as rules and accept it."

"Ughh…! If you receive the order to kill Lieutenant Ikuta, will you comply!?"

Her counter attack at the spur of the moment was simple and violent, almost perfect. Even the smooth gabbed Ikuta probably couldn't give an effective answer to such a worst case scenario — However, the exceptional person was right here.

"This question is 300 years late. Because House Igsem had been obeying such orders all this while."

Igsem answered without missing a beat… The flame coloured karma that had been burning the entire time over their long history. In the face of such a heavy pressure, Suya had no other options than being dumbfounded — Before she collapse from the fatally heavy pressure, the youth interfered.

"Enough, let's end it here, Yatori… Your righteous words would leave no avenue for escape."

He restrained her with a tired voice, then turned towards Suya whose knees were trembling from shock.

"Despite what Yatori said, I am still the commander in charge, so all of you have the rights to hate me… No, using the general term of 'rights' is already a display of arrogance huh? Because no matter how strictly the army restricts it, aside from god, no one can prohibit you from having emotions."

Ikuta sighed self mockingly and took a step back, placing his hand on the shoulder of Nanak who was lowering her head the entire time.

"… But Suya, in order to protect them, I already made Sergeant Sicindy, Corporal Ninika and Private First Class Azula give their lives… The people who were saved by their sacrificed, those who I ordered you all to bet your lives to rescue, how could I look at them in contempt…?"

After Ikuta said that, he started brushing Nanak's hair gently as if he was touching a beloved treasure. Nanak was surprised, but didn't resist, closing her eyes and accepting the touch of the youth's fingers.

"… This rationale… is too despicable…!"

Suya only squeezed these out of her mouth and didn't attempt to say anything more. However, when Ikuta approached her, she turned and ran, as if she was rejecting everything. The figure of her back passed through the light and into the dark, vanishing without a trace in no time.

"… Hey, Yatori."

Ikuta continued staring into the darkness that engulfed Suya's back as he asked the flame haired girl standing beside him.

"If you receive the orders to kill me and absolutely can't refuse them, how would you do it?"

This was an utmost cruel question without any path for redemption. However, Yatori even prepared an answer for such a question.

"When that time comes, I will first put all my effort into killing Yatorishino. In order to stop her from ever reviving no matter what happens, I will grind her soul into dust, gather them up and burn them in a fire."

Yatori spoke with a stiff face, even Haroma who was listening besides her gasped.

"When that is finished, the Igsem that is left would be responsible for killing you."

The youth nodded quietly. He kept nodding in agreement, as if he was savouring something precious.

"… Well then, until the moment my neck is severed by your dual blades — I will think about the you who have passed."

He finally answered as if they were rehearsing lines. This was also the answer Ikuta prepared ahead of time.

The two of them didn't say anything more, standing there in silence. Haroma and Nanak who was left out felt that that place looked like a sanctuary. Even though they didn't know the details, and couldn't fully understand the their friendship, but for some reason, tears welled up naturally — That's how that scene was.

Chapter 3: Phantoms and Hunters

"Just deliver it like this!"

A soldier who seemed deeply troubled was being admonished by a little girl looking up at him. The soldier glanced at the envelope in his hands as he hesitated with carrying out his orders. Princess Chamille spoke once more:

"Be it an emergency or any other case, a mere soldier's judgement can't stop a letter bearing the Imperial seal from being delivered. Just obey my orders and send this letter to central with haste!"

"B… But…"

The two of them were debating the issue about whether they could send the letter from the southern base of the northern stronghold to Central Headquarters — Lieutenant General Safida who was afraid of being taken to task had implemented information control, so the rebellion in the north and the mire-like battle situations had not been relayed to central. This caused the situation to further deteriorate.

Even Princess Chamille didn't have a clear idea of how the situation at the front line was. Although she sent her personal guards to travel between this base and the forward base to gather intelligence, it was news outdated by several days. The only things that was confirmed was that with the situation worsening, Ikuta and the other training unit serving as reserves had been committed to the front lines. Even though units with the same circumstances had been withdrawn, the five Knights continued fighting in the front lines.

She didn't have the luxury of choosing her means. The Princess suppressed her disgust, and decided to use her authority.

"… Deliver this letter to central. I am ordering you for the last time, I will bear all responsibility for this."

"But, according to the commander-in-chief's instructions…"

"If you dare argue anymore, I will treat this as an insult to the Imperial family!"

"W… What…!"

The man who was a mere messenger soldier was terrified when he heard that. He placed the envelope into his bag with trembling hands, then rode off on his horse with an expression as if he was about to cry.

"… Sorry…"

As she had to force the other party to accept a command that contradict standing orders, Princess

Chamille apologized sincerely in her heart to the figure disappearing in the distance. She then shifted her gaze up slightly, looking at the northern mountains that was now a battlefield.

"… I do want Solork and the others to have the chance to shine… but the current situation isn't clear at all…!"

She was worried about the safety of the Knight Order members, and couldn't sleep these few nights. She could only fall asleep when she was completely exhausted, as if she had fainted, and these were often accompanied by nightmares. More than several times, she dreamt about the Knight Order falling into danger.

At least, I want to understand the situation better — As the Princess was praying, the figure of another messenger charging into the base from outside appeared before her eyes.

"Report! Report! An army from Aldera is invading from the north—!"

When she heard the content yelled by the soldier, the Princess' heart froze in an instant… This meant her sleepless night will continue. That was the only truth she was certain of.

The morning after the battle in the forest at the foot of the hills. The imperial soldiers deployed on the mountain observed through the morning fog that there wasn't much changes in the situation down below and sighed in relief.

"I thought the enemy would attack in one force at dawn…"

Using the chance where no one was around, he stated what he was really thinking… That might be so, but even if others heard what he said, they probably wouldn't scold this soldier. For him, those who didn't have a single nightmare about being overrun by the enemy for one night was the minority.

"With the fire burning like this, the animals must think we are crazy for not running. It has been several days since I last saw a bird… Only the unlucky humans are left here."

He sighed and look to the sky and three birds crossed his field of vision right then. They were flying low, and he could see the bird's feathers were grey.

"Oh, so there are still animals — Hey! Not that way! Flee to the south!"

The birds didn't hear his warning, and maintained their altitude as they flew to the western sky. The soldier watched the figures of the three birds flew off in a daze, as he thought there are other silly creatures other than humans.

"— Is it here?"

After seeing the figure of the pigeons circulating in the air, the shadow blew the bird whistle in his hand once more.

The pigeon who discovered the position of its target landed. The shadow that was hiding in the dark side of the boulder allowed the pigeons to land on his arms in the order they arrived, as he retrieved the paper tied to the legs of the pigeon.

"……"

The shadow spent a few seconds to browse each piece of paper, reading the report written in small fonts that covered the entire surface. After burning its content into his head, he crumpled the papers into a ball, threw it into his mouth and swallowed it.

"… Our allies seems to be blocked at the foot of the hill."

The shadow said as he took out paper and pen from his clothes, and started writing a reply. When they heard what he said, there were slight movement behind the boulders nearby.

"The defences at the main entrance are tough, so we are instructed to open a path from the back door."

He wrote his message on the paper and tied it to the pigeon's leg securely before letting the pigeon spread its wings and take to the sky. After confirming that the pigeon was gliding in a straight line towards the northern mountains, he continued:

"Fortunately, even a specific plan has been laid out — Let's hurry."

He didn't receive any verbal response, only the movement of numerous people nodding their head could be felt. The shadow disappeared behind the boulder, and the phantoms continued their travel.

"Looks like everyone had as much sleep as I did. Alright, we will be having a happy war conference today too."

Captain Sazaruf who was seated in the innermost position said as he massaged the dark circles under his eyes. As they 'lacked chess pieces', this was a Sazaruf style sarcasm as he didn't sleep at all last night.

"I have a suggestion, how about getting the entire unit to nap for today…?"

Ikuta who was laying on the table proposed, and the Captain nodded in an exaggerated way.

"Lieutenant Ikuta, that is a splendid idea, I am all for it. Is there any objections?"

"Regrettably, I have to refute that. Because if we did that, there is a high chance we won't be able to wake up from our slumber again."

Yatori concluded the suggestion speedily. Of all the members present, she was the only one who kept her back a perfect 90 degrees to her chair. But even so, there were signs of her fatigue such as her bloodshot eyes.

“If you want to sleep, you can sleep all you want after you die, right? … Anyway, just get it started.”

Everyone was surprised when they heard Matthew speaking in a way that felt completely different from before. Captain snuck a peek at Matthew, but didn’t say anything as he coughed and started the conference.

“First, I will announce the result of the battle. After 1900 hours last night, we started a defensive battle at the barricade constructed in the middle of the forest path. After 40 minutes, we stopped the engagement and retreated. The forest path was sealed with the abandonment of the barricade as signal, and the plan was a success. The gaps in our defence line were filled and stopped the enemy’s invasion.”

Everyone thought back on the intense battle that seem too fresh on their mind, even though it had already passed.

“That was the summary, next would be the casualty report. In total, there are 85 killed in action and 63 seriously injured. All in all, we lost 148 combatants. Taking that out from our 720 strong unit, including light casualties, we have 572 men left.”

Torway listened to these numbers with a bitter face, then asked:

“… Can I have the detailed breakdown of our losses for each unit?”

“Firstly, the Shinaak suffered the heaviest casualty with 61. Next would be my men at the barricade, 24. Lieutenant Ikuta’s unit loss 19 people, Lieutenant Yatori loss 17 people. Next, Lieutenant Matthew’s unit suffered 14 casualties, Lieutenant Torway suffered 13 casualties. The above include both deaths and heavily injured.”

He was concerned about Nanak who was present, but Torway still analyzed the situation based on the content:

“Hmm~… except for the Shinaaks who lost half their numbers, the losses is not so extensive that it would affect the other unit’s operations…”

“If we only look at the numbers — By the way, what’s the losses to the air rifle units, Torway?”

When he heard Ikuta’s question, Torway’s expression turned gloomy.

“Two died from the enemy’s counter attack… However, we retrieved their air rifles.”

“That’s good. Pick two good shooters from the other men, hand the air rifle to them and assign them into the sniper team. We have enough ammunition, so find some time to let the new guys practice.”

Torway nodded, and Ikuta moved on to the next topic.

“Let’s discuss something deeper. If 100 points is full marks for yesterday’s battle, I will grade us 71 points. By the way, the passing grade is 70.”

"Eh… That means we barely scraped by?"

"If we appraise it directly, that's correct. We accomplished the minimum criteria, which is to pull the enemy's attention away from the detour route, and diminish the enemy's numbers. To be frank, I was hoping for '+α' results. The best results would be us holding on to the barricade without retreating."

If the battle could continue for 30 more minutes, not only would the enemy suffer heavier losses, the Holy Aldera Army might have to retreat momentarily after failing to gain any advantages. That way, they would be able to gain the time before they renew their offensive.

"Never mind, the enemy probably would choose to attack in the day if they retreat temporary, and we would have retreated immediately after the battle starts. But even so, we can gain half a day to a full day from that right?"

"… I remember that we need to stall them another 7 days at least, would losing one day be a catastrophic failure?"

Matthew frowned as he asked, but Ikuta shook his head as if it didn't matter.

"Not at all. According to my calculations right now, we can hold the line without any issues for the next seven days… However, if we see this as part of the retrograde support plan, there is no harm in gaining more time."

That might be so, but they couldn't change the past. Ikuta shook his head to change his mood.

"… What happen next would depends on the opponent's attitude. After we engaged once, how would the Holy Aldera Army act? Let's see what cards they will play."

"—Ryttsah*! Yes! What a beautiful morning."

Major Jean Arkinex squinted his eyes at the rising sun as he stretched his back. He had a relaxed and cheerful expression. Because for an insomniac, the arrival of the morning meant the long night was finally over.

"Good morning, Jean."

When he went before his tent with a toothbrush and salt to brush his teeth, his aide Miara Gin also came. From the look of her eyes hidden behind her black framed spectacles, she wasn't sleepy at all.

"Yah*, morning Miara… Hmm? This is?"

When Jean turned his head, the thing that caught his attention was a pigeon in Miara's hand.

"Our allies in the mountains sent a message."

When he heard the report he had been waiting for, the white haired officer's lips rose. He didn't even want to waste time brushing his teeth as he rushed to his aide, and took the paper that had been folded into a long thin strip, sent by the phantoms.

"… Syool*, as expected of your big brother, he picked only the intelligence I wanted at this time."

"According to reports, it is confirmed that the stalling defensive unit have only a little more than a battalion. The news that the enemy didn't send troops to the detour path is also important."

"There are also some interesting intelligence. First, it is certain that the imperials have a unit armed with air rifles. From what they could tell, their scale is about a platoon. They might be the ones that participated in the skirmish last night."

Jean said as he crushed the note and toss it into his mouth. Miara frowned.

"I have told you to please not do that right? It isn't good for digestion and is unhygienic. Just give it to me, I will ensure it gets burned…"

"—Mum*, my bad. Because your brother looks really cool when he did that, so I accidentally…"

As he made excuses, Jean reviewed the content of the message that had been turned into his memory.

"There is another interesting report. It seemed that the imperials had a member of the 'Igsem Blades' amongst them. After learning this information, the first thing that surprises me is that I didn't expect such elites to be at the Northern Stronghold."

"… Yes. However, my brother actually commented that her 'sword skills are exemplary'…"

"Hah, it must be very exemplary… I heard that his rank is warrant officer. Your brother didn't mention his age, but it is impossible for an Igsem to climb his way up from private to warrant officer. If he is an officer cadet in training, he would be a precious talent. Judging from the situation back then, it is very unnatural for such a person to stay in the front lines."

The two who completely assumed that the subject was a man would never have thought their imagination was off, but not just the age, the message didn't include the gender either. As there was limited space on the paper sent by the pigeon, unnecessary information would naturally be omitted… But the failure to convey that the 'enemy with exemplary sword skills is a woman' was probably influenced by something else on the author's mind.

"… No, I think that's to be expected instead. If the subject is a valuable talent, he wouldn't run away from an unfavourable battle shamelessly."

Her words show how much attention she was paying to an enemy she had never seen before. Jean had a wry smile when he observed how she subconsciously touches the hilt of her short sword.

"If we are blockaded here because of a situation caused by that fellow, that would be rather dramatic."

“I think that no matter what, a mere warrant officer won’t…”

“Nyatt*! It would be normal for him to received a battlefield promotion. Think about it, wouldn’t it fit if that flame haired Igsem planned this unprecedented wall of fire defence?”

Miara sighed as she turned her gaze towards her senior officer whose head was filled with romantic imagination. After Jean composed himself, he coughed intentionally to hide his embarrassment.

“Mum*, a…anyway, we have finally restored contact with our allies. Fortunately, they didn’t suffer any serious losses, so let’s execute a bold cooperative plan. I have decided the strategy.”

“Understood, should we report this to General Akugarpa?”

Jean nodded as he walked forward, finally noticed the toothbrush in his right hand and stuck it into his mouth again.

“Yah*, wait a minute, I will be done soon.”

Two hours later, Ikuta and company ended their meeting, it is 8 something in the morning. Suya opened her eyes, and found out she overslept from the bright sunlight shining through the tent.

“… Wah… Oh no…”

Suya got up in a panic and groomed herself. Basically, the deputy has to get up earlier than the commander. Even if she ignored that, according to regulations, soldiers must get up before 7am in the morning. No matter how tired she was, she would be able to get up by the appointed time. But after what happened last night, she couldn’t do this much.

“Yoki, why didn’t you wake me! …Hmm?”

When Suya complained to her light spirit partner and look around her, the anxious atmosphere she expected wasn’t there. Most of the female soldiers she shared the large tent with were still sleeping, and the few who woke up were writing letters to their family. This was a typical scene during break time.

Suya felt confused. One of the female soldier who noticed her reaction stopped writing and said to her:

“Good morning, Sergeant Major Mittokarifu. There’re orders from the top to rest until 9am, do you want to sleep a while more?”

“Huh…? When was there such an order…?”

“Lieutenant Ikuta came by when you were still sleeping, Sergeant Major, and passed the orders to me who happened to be awake. There’s a board with the same orders at the tent’s entrance.”

When she heard that, Suya turned her gaze towards the entrance… And sure enough, there's a board that wrote 'By orders of First Lieutenant Ikuta: Everyone are to rest until 9am in the morning'. She didn't need to hurry in grooming herself, but she didn't felt like sleeping again either, so she just stood there in a daze.

"… Can't sleep? Sergeant Major, you want to write letters too? There is no telling when we'll have another chance."

The female soldier suggested, as she herself was writing her letter on top of a crate that served as a table. Suya watched this scene blankly.

"… A letter home huh… Sergeant Yanashia, what did you write?"

"Erm, about that, the contents tend to read like a last will under such circumstances. I have been troubled, trying to find a happier topic."

She might sound like she was kidding, but there was no doubt she said that because of her comrades who died in battle yesterday before they could write the letter. If I want to write a last will, now would be my last chance — such a thought came to her mind, but she shook her head to shake it off.

"… I will pass. This might sound unfilial, but writing something under the pretext that I would die sounds scary, I couldn't do it."

"That's a choice too. And I feel that those who had the guts to say 'I don't need any last letters as I will definitely survive', will really live on."

Sergeant Yanashia said something unexpectedly liberal. On the other hand, Suya who wasn't sleeping or writing felt out of place inside the tent.

"… I'm going out for a bit, and offer some flowers to our fallen comrades."

"Can you do that? We have orders to rest until 9am."

"It's not an order for us to sleep, just treat this as my way of resting and give me some leeway."

Suya felt it was a terrible excuse, but Sergeant Yanashia simply smiled wryly and didn't say anything more. Suya expressed her thanks with her gaze, and left the tent quietly, careful not to wake the others.

"… Ah, speaking of which, even if I want to offer flowers…"

Suya took a step forward when she realized what was wrong with her thinking. In order to offer flowers, there need to be flowers in the surroundings. She surveyed the area, and there didn't seem to be any flowers growing near the base. There might be a chance to find them in the forest, but it is too reckless to search for flowers in that smog.

Suya wandered around aimlessly to look for signs of flowers, and gave up shortly after. She wanted to at least clean the faces of her fallen comrades and headed to the tents where the bodies were

placed after preparing wet towels.

“Ah…” x2

When she was about to enter the tent, she happened to run into Nanak Dar who was coming out. After freezing for a few seconds, a difficult to describe silence fell between them.



“… What… What are you doing here? This should be the place for the bodies of the imperial soldiers.”

The one who mustered her courage to speak first was Suya, the surging dark emotions in her chest spilled out from her throat.

“Even if you hate the imperials, I won’t allow you to desecrate the dead…!”

When she sense the hostility in her words, the Shinaak Tribal Chief trembled slightly, then slump her shoulders and lowered her head.

"… I didn't do such things."

"Just what are you doing here—"

At this point of the conversation, Suya finally noticed. In the hands of the girl before her were something she couldn't find no matter how much she searched.

She felt it was impossible, but she still walk pass Nanak, slipping into the tent. The truth was right before her.

"Ah—"

On the chest of the fallen were small white flowers. There were more than 30 bodies, but it was the same for each one of them. On top of the discoloured skin, covered in dark blood soaked brown uniform was a small white flower, which was so brilliant that it looks like a form of salvation that came from the heavens.

"… You… came to offer flowers…?"

Suya watched the unexpected scene before her in a daze. After a while, she said to Nanak who was standing quietly behind her.

"… Where did these flowers came from?"

"… I went to the mountains to get them. According to Shinaak customs, white flowers are offered to the fallen as a sign of respect."

Nanak looked at the flowers left in her hand as she answered. She used a few seconds to swallow her hesitation, then lowered her head to Suya.

"… I am sorry. It's all because I charged too far ahead in the battle last night, that's why you all suffered unnecessary casualties while rescuing us. All of them died because of this."

"…Please say no more."

Suya rejected Nanak's apology immediately. She felt that something would fail to stand if she listened on.

"There's nothing to apologize for, we are enemies at each other's throat just a few days ago. It's the same this time too, your enemies are just being stupid and marching to their own deaths — You just need to think like that and mock us!"

Suya turned back and roared at Nanak. Nanak who was gazing downwards shook her head.

"The fact that I hate the imperials haven't changed. I am still filled with grudge against you who robbed us of our way of life… However, that has nothing to do with the mistakes I made. The Shinaaks know shame, and understand how big a favour we owe for letting you risk your lives to save

us."

"That's why you are willing to apologize to the enemy!? Such a thing… Acting in such a way is…!"

"Your senior officer also did the same thing to me. He apologize for not acting in the right way as a soldier, and cut off his little finger as evidence… I believe in his attitude in living his life. So just like Ikuta, I want to ask if you are willing to believe me."

Nanak's eyes were filled with determination as she reached out both hands towards Suya.

"Even if I cut off all the fingers in my hands, it would not be enough to pay for the number of comrades you lost — so, after this war is over, you all can take both my hands."

"… Ugh!"

"However, I hope you can wait until the war ends. Just for the duration of this war, I hope you can allow me to take responsibility as a Shinaak warrior, and allow me to keep my hands to wield my weapons."

Under the stare of Nanak's pleading eyes, Suya back away unsteadily. The emotions in her heart was no longer hatred and rage, but the feeling of fear that was far more absolute and pure.

"… Don't… Please don't say anymore…"

She groaned. Suya asked her senior officer in the past — Isn't killing a large number of enemy their job? At the same time, thinking this way was just a mean of guarding and keeping oneself sane in the abnormal battlefield environment. It was fine to kill the enemy, there was no need to apologize to the enemy for anything — If she had absolute faith in this, Suya would be able to acknowledge herself who was killing others.

"This is not right… Because… That way… What should I do to forgive myself…!"

That preconception collapsed, crumbled because the enemy was apologizing. Suya fell to the ground on her knees.

"I didn't want to kill anyone… I didn't want to burn the village…! I didn't want to fight with people from the same nation as me…!"

Her tears dripped onto the dry ground. Before Suya who had collapsed in tears, Nanak knelt so their eyes were at the same level.

"You are saying… You have been ordered to fight in this war you want no part of?"

"I know saying this is selfish! I don't need anyone to remind me, I know very well I can just quit the army! But no one told me that war is such an incorrigible thing! That being a soldier would mean fighting in a war that is completely unjust…!"

Once her self restraint was broken, Suya couldn't hold back the thoughts surging out from her mind. Nanak who didn't know what to say stayed quiet before the sobbing Suya. At this moment, a figure suddenly appeared along with the light shining through the entrance of the tent.

"Don't take away your superior's job, Sergeant Major Mittokarifu. These are the responsibilities of the one who gave the orders."

That surprised the two of them who turned and looked, and found Captain Sazaruf who was biting onto a cigarette at the entrance. He had an awkward look on his face, probably feeling bad about eavesdropping on the conversation between girls.

"Hey, this might be my own opinion… But I think all the enlisted soldiers and non commissioned officers who fought dutifully will go to heaven when they die. Because under the lead of the incompetent officers, they complete the tasks that is detested by all in a wonderful manner , and is worthy of praise."

"However—" Captain Sazaruf's tone changed and showed a practiced expression of self mocking.

"Those high ranking officers, including me, will all fall into hell. The reason is the opposite, because they let their dutiful subordinates fight in a worthless war, killing dozens and hundreds… No matter how exemplary one is, there are no officers who can avoid losing men. The only difference is how many they lose."

After saying that, the Captain squatted down before Suya. The moment their eyes met, a smile appeared on his face where the stubbles had become a beard.

"However, even we are working hard to go to a less terrible hell. In order to do that, we have to finish the jobs that corresponds to our position. So Sergeant Major Mittokarifu… if you are suffering from the burden of guilt you shouldn't be bearing, that would be troubling for us. After all, that would mean I am slacking off."

"……"

"Alright, listen carefully. The people you think you killed are all killed by me; All the villages you think you burnt are burnt by me. If you are questioned by the gods in the other world, you just need to answer that with your chest held high. You completely your mission excellently so there is no reason you should be blamed."

His gentle words slowly healed her heart, and Suya wiped away her tears and look up at the Captain.

"… Captain, but wouldn't you be punished severely by the gods?"

"Don't worry, I have superior officers too. For the times I couldn't rely on them in life, I will get them to pay back in full after death."

After hearing this strange idea, Suya couldn't help laughing. Captain Sazaruf sighed in relief, then stood up straight and scratched his head.

“I will end the old man lecture here. Let’s change the topic… Have you two seen Lieutenant Ikuta? I’m looking for him, but couldn’t find him.”

Suya and Nanak looked at each other. It was clear from their reaction that the two of them didn’t know either, and the Captain who didn’t know what to do now seemed troubled. At this moment, a Shinaak man spoke politely from behind him:

“Chief Nanak, are you in there…? Something troubling has happened, I wish to discuss it with you.”

Nanak who heard the call left the tent immediately, and the Shinaak man started explaining with a troubled attitude. The two of them ran off after ending their conversation, Suya and Captain Sazaruf who heard the contents hd no choice but to follow.

They headed to one of the large tents where the Shinaaks slept in, and a troubling situation which needed Nanak’s attention was in there.

“— What is this fellow doing?”

Captain Sazaruf squeezed out a line which could be in either resignation or exasperation. Even though they didn’t say it, Suya and Nanak felt the same way. The Shinaak men around them with baffled faces were probably thinking the same thing.

In the middle of the tent, Ikuta Solork was sleeping soundly with his limbs spread out. His entire body was buried in straws, and he seemed to be absolutely comfortable.

“He came about an hour ago, and asked for an empty spot to sleep… And of course, we ask him to sleep in his own tent, but he insist that he have to sleep in a bed of straws today no matter what. He wouldn’t give in, and just slept like this…”

After hearing what happened, even Captain Sazaruf who didn’t know him well could imagine what happened. He sighed, but Suya watched the youth sleeping soundly with a lamentation.

“… An existence that was saved by their sacrifices huh…”

Suya muttered, then looked at all the Shinacks within the tent in turn. The action of sleeping in this space was undoubtedly a way of showing ‘I trust you all’ with his body. To be honest, Suya still couldn’t understand the mentally Ikuta had before the opponents he was fighting to the death with, but…

“… So you are not making excuses and just saying something superficial…”

Suya recalled Yatori’s words that the Shinacks were allies, and the youth before her who was guaranteeing these words with his actions — she couldn’t accept it in the beginning, but could face it calmly now.

After experiencing the state of mind she never had before, he looked at Nanak nonchalantly, and found her pouting as she looked at the sleeping face of the youth as she said softly:

“— Ikuta you dense boy. If you want to sleep, just come to my bed.”

Suya turned stiff, but Captain Sazaruf pretended he never heard anything.”

“E… Erm, Nanak Dar, what did you say…?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

In response to this attitude which wasn’t clear if she was pretending to be retarded or just dense, Suya was hesitant about pursuing the matter — At this moment, an anxious shout of a messenger came from outside.

“Captain Sazaruf! Lieutenant Ikuta! Where are you! Emergency report! The enemy is moving!”

At this moment, the rhythmic breathing of the slumbering youth stopped, and he opened his eyes a little.

“— It’s finally here.”

“For the troops to be despatched on the western detour route, how about sending 500 cavalry that could seat two, and 300 infantry? To reduce weight, only bring the necessity, and let the supply unit trail behind them on foot.”

In response to Jean who came to propose his plan as usual, General Akugarpa crossed his arms with a face in deep thought.

“… If I only send cavalry, they might not be of use because of the terrain; if I send only infantry, it would take too much time to reach. To make up for these flaws, the idea of seating two isn’t bad…”

“However, our cavalry lack training in moving under such conditions. If the horses have to seat two, it won’t be able to gallop, just walking fast would be its limit.”

In retaliation of the Kioka soldier who was treating himself like a staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Michelin refuted the idea. However, Jean was waiting for that.

“Mum*. How about letting my cavalry take on this mission. I am confident they are skilled enough to accomplish this mission.”

This bold proposal made General Akugarpa looked at Jean with suspicious eyes.

“… Do you mean, you want to lead a battalion down the detour path personally?”

“Hah*, that is a good idea, but I have my reasons for staying here. I will hand half of my unit, 300 cavalry to my staff officer Captain Harrah, who will lead them there. I feel bad about this, but I hope you could provide a similar number of infantry to ride with them, as well as the 200 cavalry who will ride alone.”

General Akugarpa's eyes sharpened further,as if he was trying to read the white haired officer's true intention.

"… Assuming we adopt this plan, will 800 men be enough? If you run into a fortress along the mountain path, it will be difficult to break through with these numbers."

"That is true. However, mobilizing more riders would be unrealistic too. Including my unit, we only have 2000 cavalry. Considering the need to pursue the enemy after breaking through here, I want to avoid spreading our forces out as much as possible."

"… I have a gist of what you are scheming. Simply put, it is fine even if the detour path doesn't work right?"

The General made a sharp accusation, and Jean applauded without hesitation for this speculation.

"Yah, such great insights, General. We didn't treat the detour to the west as a route for our forces advance anyway, so casting our fate on it would be the same as a gamble. However, I would like to minimize the number of times we throw dices on the battlefield, that is my principle."

"You are dispatching troops despite that. In short, your intention is to spread the enemy's forces."

Jean nodded with a bold smile, and cast his sights to the forest.

"According to the skirmish we fought, the unit defending against us here is just a battalion +α. Considering the casualties they suffered, they have a bit more than 500 men right now. We can see that the enemy don't have any troops to spare— and if we send a group down the detour route, the enemy would be forced to send out a detachment to defend."

"And that would lead to the defences here weakening."

"Yah*… It has been two days since the wall of fire had been built, it is about time for the burning rate around the forest to show gaps. This will then become a hole in the wall of flames for us to pass through. If the enemy send 200 men to the west to defend against our detached forces, They would need to handle this situation with less than 400 men."

"They wouldn't be able to last long if they push themself that hard… Alright, even though your scheming face is more of an eyesore than usual, I will go with your plan once more— Hey! Michelin!"

The deputy who was named stood up straight and faced his superior.

"Pick 200 men from our cavalry, 300 from our infantry, and place them under Captain Taznyado Harrah's command. As for the supply team following them, picked suitable candidates from those energetic ones."

"Yes Sir!"

“If the enemy take no actions after we send out this detachment, it means they have already deployed troops on the detour route. If that happens, we would need to commit a few hundred more cavalry to force them to divide their forces… No, wait! In such a situation, wouldn’t it be bad if the enemy doesn’t move!?”

Because of the screen formed by the trees of the Gagarukasakan forest, the Holy Aldera Army couldn’t grasp the movement of the enemy from the other side of the woods. In that case, they wouldn’t be able to make the judgement on whether to send reinforcement.

As General Akugarpa was scratching his head, Jean put his hand on his chin in deep thought, his expression looking suspiciously like an act.

“You are right, it is hard to come up with a plan without knowing the enemy’s movements, to think I overlooked something so important —Mum?… Wyt… Ety… Mum?… Yah… Syool*! Good news, General! I just happen to think of a brilliant plan!”

Jean announced, with ‘that’ Kioka smile on his face. General Akugarpa who already agreed to go along with his plans had an ominous feeling, but had to ask about the content of the ‘brilliant plan’.

“… Let’s hear it, what do you have in mind?”

“This is a very simple and effective way of resolving this. Actually, I raised the same suggestion before, but in order to execute it, I need the gods to turn a blind eye a little—”

“M… Message from the rear! An enemy detachment had set off towards the west!”

Under the sky shrouded by the smog from the forest, the messenger used an off key voice to report to the officers standing in a row.

“They composed of 500 cavalry, more of half of them carrying two person. It seemed that infantry soldiers are riding behind the cavalry.”

When she heard the content of the report, Yatori who was commanding a cavalry unit reacted first:

“What skilled actions… Their speed?”

“They are traveling at the pace of a slow jog. Even taking in the fact that they need to walk after entering the mountain paths, they should reach the fortress on the detour route if they keep to this pace.”

These words made Yatori show an impressed expression, Ikuta besides her nodded with determination.

“We should send out an intercepting force fast, Captain Sazaruf. It is obvious that the enemy’s aim is to divide our forces, but we can only take up the challenge despite that.”

“Indeed… In that case, we need to discuss who should head to the fort.”

Captain Sazaruf looked at his subordinates one at a time. Although everyone here, be it Matthew, Torway or even the medical corps Haroma wouldn't show fear if they receive the orders to move out, Ikuta and Yatori raised their hands to not waste time.

"If the Captain can loan me 80 men, I will think of something together with Torway."

"The same for me."

Torway who was named by Ikuta probably expected this to happen, and looked as if he had already resolved himself. But for some reason, Captain Sazaruf who heard their request to move out sighed lightly.

"… I was troubling over it just now, but… Yup, I will go this time."

Nobody couldn't hide their surprise when they heard this proposal. Haroma was the first to ask:

"Erm… Captain, you are the overall commander here right? Wouldn't it be inappropriate for you to leave…?"

"That would be true normally. But Lieutenant Haroma, hear my gutless opinion — To be honest, this war has surpassed my capability for a long while now. Even though I am in charge on the grounds, I don't have the confidence to handle any sudden changes adequately. I am really spineless…"

When they heard the honest confession of their superior, everybody was dumbstruck. The Captain continued speaking in the silence:

"We only made it so far because of the help from your group of excellent subordinates. If I disregard my shame and state it clearer, it's because Lieutenant Ikuta and Lieutenant Yatori could see the future development of the war much better than I could… That's why I feel it would be bad if the two of you left. As though if one of you is gone, it will led to a gap that will destroy us all."

The Captain's tone was serious. Ikuta and Yatori remained quiet with a complicated expression.

"In comparison, if it is just an orthodox stalling battle fought by defending a fort, even I would be able to manage. I know I wouldn't qualify as a superior if I did that, but I hope to follow the logic of sending the right man to do the right job, so I should go. But it would be unsettling with just the light infantry I have, so I will borrow some wind gunners from Lieutenant Matthew and Lieutenant Torway. All in all, I just need 200 men."

No one raise any objections next, so Captain Sazaruf knew his proposal had been accepted. When Ikuta saw the Captain was about to muster his men immediately, he said to the Captain:

"… I understand. Leave this place to us, please head to the detour route to intercept them, Captain. Our Shinack allies should have prepared the wind cannons, please make use of them to enhance the defences. It won't be easy battle for the next seven days. I wish you good luck."

They snap their right hand to their forehead in salute. This action served as the proof of the duties

being entrusted and accepted.

“But Captain, aside from the manpower you estimated, please take Torway’s entire unit with you.”

“… Is that fine? If the air rifle unit is here, the defences would be easier.”

“I named Torway just now for a certain reason. I don’t have the time to explain, but instead of here, it is more likely for the air rifles to be needed at the detour route.”

Ikuta said with an intense tone. As there was no reason to refuse, Captain Sazaruf looked at Torway himself to confirm.

“… That seems to be the case, are you willing to join me, Lieutenant Torway?”

“Ah… Yes Sir!”

Even though Torway wanted to move forth right after responding, Ikuta grabbed him by the back collar suddenly.

“— Captain, before setting off, I need to borrow Torway for about 20 minutes. Please gather your men in the meantime, it’s fine to set off first, I will let him catch up soon.”

Ikuta walked away while dragging the collar with him. Captain could only watch them go dumbfoundedly, even Torway himself was looking at Ikuta bafflingly.

“I said I named you for a certain reason right? Anyway, just accompany back to the headquarters tent, I have something to tell you. You already have experience, so you can understand with just 20 minutes.”

“Something to tell me…? Ik-kun, you mean…”

Ikuta made a bee line for the tent 10m ahead as he revealed the answer softly:

“Only one plan is needed right? That is the way to fend off the phantoms.”

The two of them exited the tent some time later, the ones waiting for them were Matthew and Haroma.

“I don’t know what you two are busy with, but it took a lot of time. The Captain have already set off.”

“It will be fine if you meet up with him before reaching the fort — Alright, I’m going off then.”

Ikuta bidded off casually, then ran off somewhere. Matthew was taken aback by his attitude.

“He is not sending Torway off? I don’t see Yatori either, the two of them sure are cold. Depending on the circumstances, this might be the last farewell…”

Matthew realized his words were unlucky mid way and shut his mouth. Torway didn’t seem to mind,

and smiled at his slightly plump friend.

“I think Ik-kun doesn’t think that. In our earlier discussion, he told me: ‘This is a winnable battle, so fight normally and return after scoring a victory’.”

“A winnable battle… huh? Even though that is a defensive battle in a fort, that is a strange way of putting it…”

Haroma raised a simple query. Torway answered with a meaningful silence, then turned.

“Then, I should go now… You will face many trying situation, but it will be fine if you follow Ik-kun and Yatori-san. Please don’t fall behind too, Matthew and Haroma-san. This is a ‘winnable battle’, I’m certain of it.”

The two comrades stood in place as they watch Torway with his air rifle on his back walking into the distance. After seeing him left the site with his subordinates who were waiting, Matthew finally sighed softly.

“… How should I put this, that guy changed. Did he matured? Became more forceful? When we first met, he gave the impression of being unreliable.”

“I feel the same. Maybe he gained confidence after being given more chances to perform.”

Haroma nodded in agreement. After knowing Ikuta and receiving the new weapon, air rifles, Torway’s performance became more brilliant as the days pass by. Just like a butterfly breaking out of its cocoon.

“… Completely different from me.”

“Hmm?”

“Since the battle yesterday, I had been imagining the moment I get killed. Maybe I’m trying to get use to death by doing that? I know this is stupid, but I couldn’t stop myself…”

Seeing Matthew grabbing and lowering his head, Haroma who was worried about him tried to find the right words to say, but couldn’t offer the adequate encouragement. She looked into the air helplessly, as if she was looking for salvation…

“… Uwah! M… Matthew-san! Look at that…!”

She happened to discover a threat she saw in the past floating in the air.

“G… General! What is going on here!”

It wasn’t just the imperials who was shaken by that shadow floating in the sky. At the same time,

while General Akugarpa was drinking tea, a subordinate with an enraged expression, charged into his tent.

“T… To use that taboo thing that offends the one star flag we are raising for the jihad! No matter what reason it is, I will not accept it!”

“Calm down, Colonel Gisspa. I don’t understand what you are saying, what exactly is that taboo thing?”

The General of the Holy Aldera Army calmed his subordinate with a low voice as he placed the tea he was drinking halfway back onto the table. The middle aged officer Gisspa continued speaking agitatedly.

“Do you not know, General…? Then that Kioka brat was the one who decided to use that thing on his own… Ahh, it will take too much time to explain! Pardon me General, please follow me outside immediately! Please hurry!”

In response to the strong urging of his subordinate, the General left the tent together with his adjutant Lieutenant Colonel Michelin. They looked up in the air outside, and found the ‘thing’ causing the problem, which made General Akugarpa open his eyes wide.

“— What is this!? I didn’t permit that thing!”

“As expected! That damn brat… A filthy Kiokian dare insult the jihad in such a way! In that case, General!”

Colonel Gisspa looked at his senior officer with the pure eyes of a religious devotee. Even though that gaze was pricking at the conscience of General Akugarpa, he maintained his dignity and nodded.

“Bring that audacious fellow here right now! … No, wait! Going by the personality of that brat, he might be up there right now. If that is so, once that that thing lands, grab him and bring him here!”

“Yes Sir! I will send my men…”

“Hold it! You seem to have lost your composure over this, so I will remind you first. Don’t use violence on those people, and do not break that thing. I understand how you feel, but that sort of impulsive behaviour will affect relations between Kioka and our home nation.”

“Ugh…? But General, if we don’t use this chance to teach him a good lesson, that brat will become more arrogant…”

“Don’t worry, I will reprimand him so badly that he will go insane, and let that brat experience your wrath in full. I will make him weak in the knees… No, I will make him pee his pants.”

When he heard that, Colonel Gisspa showed a devious smile, and left with the words “I understand, I will be counting on you.” General Akugarpa watch him go into the distance before returning to his tent and sit down again. He then pick up the tea that had turned cold and finished it in one go.

"… Phew, doing such things don't fit my character. Did I bluff my way through just now, Michelin?"

"I don't see anything unnatural. Colonel Gisspa should be convinced that Major Arkinex made the decision to deploy that thing himself."

His adjutant answered seriously. But the General didn't miss the scowl on his face.

"… You might be saying that, but your expression is the same as the Colonel. Never mind, this is to be expected."

"Going so far as to break the taboo in order to win… That is the Kioka way of thinking. General, as the commander of the Ra-Saia-Alderamin Holy Army, it is not appropriate for you to lean towards these means."

"It is as you say, I think we have fallen completely into their trap this time… That might be so, but fighting in a way that is acceptable to god would not bring us victory, so I can only bear with it this round."

This order lack the impact from the ones he usually gave. When he saw Lieutenant Colonel Michelin nodded slightly, the Holy Army General hesitated and then said:

"… Hey Michelin. Assuming, just assuming… if one day, your senior officer had fallen so much that he isn't qualified to be a servant of god, and becomes a real fool…"

"Such a situation won't happen, I won't let it. Please don't look down on me."

Using the chance when he was stuttering, Lieutenant Colonel Michelin finished those words. The strict concern that suited his adjutant's personality made the General smile awkwardly, and he didn't say anything more.

"—Yah*! The sky is clear with gentle breeze, a most suitable day to fly in the sky. Don't you think so, Miara!?"

"No! This is a disastrous day! Being in a middle of a storm on the ground would put me more at ease!"

Two voices that came from a man and a woman, with completely opposite temperature echoed through the vast open sky. The thing floating in the air was a large container that was filled with enough gas to make it bloat, and had a basket attached underneath it to ferry people.

This was the invention that gave Kioka the idea for an 'air force' — the balloon.

"If you have the time for idle chat, please finish your job faster! How is the movement of the enemy leaving their base!?"

Compared to Jean who was surveying the ground cheerfully with a telescope in hand, Miara was shivering in a heap at the bottom of the basker. As expected of her, she didn't let go of her pen and

paper for recording purposes. But the scene of her like this reminds others of small animals that couldn't get down after climbing to the top of trees.

"Syah*… A unit about a hundred or so men is setting off to the west, a smaller unit is following right behind. In total, the two units have about 200 soldiers. There didn't seem to be any cavalry. I can't tell the finer details on their make up from here."

"Two hundred in total… Alright, I recorded it down! Since we confirm these intelligence, that mean the mission is complete! Then let's head back to the ground right now, even if it is a second sooner!"

"… Hah*, Miara, if you are that afraid, why did you push yourself to follow me?"

"It is true that I very much want to do that, but if I didn't tag along, you would have set off by yourself! Even though you completed air trooper training, I won't let you do something so dangerous!"

Even though they ascended some distance from the forest, but depending on the wind, there was a non zero chance of the balloon being blown towards enemy territory. If that happens, having multiple passengers would make landing much quicker. It was understandable why Miara made the decision to follow him.

"I am happy about your concern… But this is a rare chance, you want to try getting use to the sky? After all, there might be a chance to ride a balloon in the future."

"I full heartedly refuse. I might not be a believer of Aldera, but I share their opinion on this taboo form of transportation."

"Mum*, don't say that. Want to try it standing up first?

"What nonsense are you saying… Hmm… Wait… What are you doing? D-Don't do that, really, no… Even if it is you, I will get angry — Hyahhhh!"

The screams didn't reach the ground, and the imperial army didn't suffer meaningless influence from that.

"… To think they set off a balloon under the one star flag war, just how did they receive permission from their commanders?"

Amidst the rowdy noises of the soldiers, Ikuta showed an expression that was half surprise and half impressed. Besides him, Yatori was also staring at the sky with a similar face.

"Maybe, aside from that exchange officer, the commander of the Holy Aldera Army himself is rather flexible in his thinking. Or maybe he has been reduced to a puppet…"

Ikuta nodded in response to Yatori's opinion, then clap his hands hard to attract the attention of people around him.

"Alright, listen up! That is a balloon used purely for scouting, don't be fooled by it and keep looking up at the sky. Compared to that thing, we should look at reality and our future!"

When Ikuta saw his subordinates composed themselves, turn and look at him, he nodded satisfactorily and proceed to the main topic.

"Alright, let's talk about what happen next. As everyone knows, we still need to buy 7 more days of time. Even though we foresee that the enemy would use the detour as a countermeasure, the main battlefield is still here, we will still need to continue blocking the Holy Aldera Army for a while more."

Ikuta pointed to the forest, and everyone followed with their gaze. Everyone then noticed that compared to the beginning, the pressure from the heat and smog had shifted quite a distance northwards.

"As you can all see, the fire in the forest had moved quite a bit. With this, there would be difference in the burning rate at each of the zone, and the fire line will be crooked. From now on, the enemy will attack these gaps, and what we need to do is clear."

"First, repair the fire wall; Second, chase out the enemy who tries to break through."

Nanak was the first to answer. Hearing this adequate reply, Ikuta was pleased and nodded.

"That's right. We need our allies situated on the mountains behind us to provide support in identifying the gaps, and send people to the places where the fire has died or is dying, and rekindle the flames. Just think of it as using clothes to mend the holes in our pants."

"And of course, the enemy would attack the same spots, so accordingly to the situation, there would be encounter battles on these places. Having lesser battles would be great, but repelling the enemy is still our duty."

Yatori added quickly. At this moment, Sergeant Major Mittokarifu raised her hand uneasily.

"Erm… considering our difference in numbers, the enemy would send more people than us. Can we really defend until the very end…?"

"It is natural for you to ask this, but there is no problem. As for our fire defence line, we have a few advantages since we are the one who set it up."

"Our advantages…?"

"First would be our allies on the mountains behind us. Thanks to their high vantage point, we can keep watch over every corner of the forest. In other words, it would be easier for us to find the places where the firewall might be broken, and can deploy efficiently in most instances."

"The enemy also have a balloon, so being about to see from a high vantage point is the same for both sides right?"

“Since they are not familiar with the winds in this region, and considering the danger of being blown into our territory, the enemy won’t be able to fly too high. And because of that, the range they could observe would be limited. On top of that, balloons aren’t thing that could remain airborne for long periods of time as it couldn’t maneuver against the wind. It would be a concern if they could deploy four of five of them. But right now, that is very unlikely. As the enemy is a holy army campaigning under an one star flag, they have to show consideration with regards to that.”

Also, the balloon would need time to ascend or descend. Unless they had enough crews and balloon, it would be impossible to use them efficiently. Just imagining how reckless it was to use balloons in a mountainous terrain without knowing the wind direction well, made it hard to believe that the enemy had prepared an adequate number of air trooper.

“Next would be terrain advantage. When we find a place where the fire is about to die out, we just need to rush to the scene. But the enemy would need to bash through the forest to get there. As they would be forcing their way through without proper roads, they will need to travel a longer distance, and even lose their way. That means if both side move towards the same target at the same time, we will definitely reach earlier.”

Maybe she felt it was doable as she listened to the explanation, the gloom on Suya’s face lightened. In order to boost her confidence, Ikuta explained another favourable condition.

“The final advantage, is that we have the Shinaaks as the local guides, so we won’t go the long way or get lost when we move. I don’t need to tell you that this is our biggest advantage.”

When they heard Ikuta say that, the Imperial soldiers shift their attention to the Shinaaks who were congregating behind. Except for the 59 men under Nanak Dar’s command, the other 600 were non combatants. But in order to maintain the fire wall, working together with them was inevitable. Ikuta speech was based on this assumption.

“I will explain it in another way, the tactics from now on would be unorthodox mobile defense. We need to respond to the gaps in the fire wall and the enemy’s movement, sending only the necessary people to the necessary place. We just need to repeat these actions for seven days, nothing special to note. To accomplish this, the only thing I need from you all is a scientific mindset.”

When they heard Ikuta said this term after such a long time, his subordinates emotions heightened for unknown reasons.

“In the next seven days, all of you need to be lazy in the correct way. Work at the right time, eat at the right time, rest at the right time. Because if you don’t do that, you won’t be able to maintain your work efficiency. In other words, if we can maintain our efficiency, before the deadline is up, there won’t be any gaps for the enemy breakthrough — I have no doubt about this future.”

When they saw Ikuta guarantee the mission will be a success with a firm attitude, the soldiers looked at him with eyes close to worship. The youth accepted their trust solemly, and after signalling Yatori besides him with a look, he said loudly:

"— The mobile defense battle plan begins now! I will now announce the area each platoon will be responsible, and will move to!"

At the same time, Captain Sazaruf's intercepting unit headed to the west on the shortest path under the lead of the Shinaaks. They linked up with Torway's unit on the way there, and reached the Fort a day and a half after setting off.

"Oh~ this place is sturdier than I imagined."

That was the first thing the Captain said. The Fort was built on a mountain path 1000m above sea level, completely blocking the way through. The route was really narrow too — less than 15m wide, making it easy to defend.

"Let me confirm first, are there any gaps that could even bypass this detour path?"

"No way. This is one of the fort built to defend any invasion from Aldera. If they want to bypass this route, they would need to scale the cliffs that even the mountain goats wouldn't climb."

When he heard the Shinaak man responsible for repairing the fort giving his words as he introduce the facilities, Captain Sazaruf could finally feel at ease. The thoughts that this might just work came into his mind.

"I understand. Then, erm… You are Merai right? How goes the Fort repairs?"

"Before you arrive, we already mended the places that we could, but the structure of the fort is already quite old, and we couldn't do anything about that. If it comes under intense cannon bombardment or a battering ram attack, it wouldn't last."

"As expected… Never mind, thankfully, the enemy that are coming on horseback didn't bring wind cannons."

"Don't let your guard down, the enemy might forage for logs that could serve as a battering ram."

"Even if that happens, we won't let the enemy do as they wish — What about our wind cannons?"

"The cannons that were here had already deteriorated with age, so we transported 5 cannons here from the mountains. Please overlook the fact that their sizes aren't uniform."

After Merai finished, he leaned out from the fort and pointed to the middle of the fortress wall, where the enemy are expected to come from. There were 6 cannons placed there. The Captain wished there could be more cannons, but the fact it was situated on high grounds beyond the reach of the enemy was great.

"… Good, first would be the deployment of the soldiers, and since we have the manpower, we will reinforce the fortress before the enemy reaches. Are there anymore wood left?"

After grasping the condition of the fort, the Captain decided to discuss with Merai on how to go about

their work. However, Lieutenant Torway who was waiting behind him all this while spoke suddenly:

“Erm, Captain. I am sorry about doing this when you wish to have more manpower on hand… But in the next 3 hours, can you allow my unit to act independently?”

Captain looked back with eyes wide open, he never expected such a request from this subordinate of his.

“… Reinforcing the fort would directly affect the long term defence of this place. What is your reason?”

It was only natural to ask, but Torway averted his eyes awkwardly.

“Well… It’s… hard to say this… I have been asked strictly to not tell the Captain as it would have a negative effect.”

Captain wanted to query who exactly asked that of him, but realized the answer before speaking. Out of all the subordinates he had, there was only one guy who would do something as reckless as hiding their actions from their superiors.

“… Is it the instruction of Lieutenant Ikuta?”

“It is as you guessed…”

“… Forget it, I understand alright. It’s a bit aggravating, but i am the one who said he is the best at reading the flow of the war, so let him do what he need. Be it 3 or 4 hours, do as you please.”

“My deepest apologies… I will get it done as quickly as possible.”

“Damn it, you already said all that, so do it thoroughly until you are satisfied! We will think of something without you. But once the enemy approaches, get into position immediately to engage.”

Torway received an energetically response and permission from his reasonable superior, and jog down the fort in quick steps. He met up with his unit and headed in the direction that was opposite from where the enemy was coming. Merai tilted his head bafflingly when he saw that.

“… What are they thinking? That path will just lead into the middle of the mountains.”

“I don’t know either, he won’t tell me when I asked.”

Captain Sazaruf said in a manner as if he was throwing a tantrum, then turned to Merai with his feelings composed.

“We need to put the right man to the right job, so let’s do whatever we can, Merai.”

The Holy Aldera Army 800 men detachment force arrived in the evening, about half a day later than the imperials. The force commander Captain Taznyado Harrah didn’t waste the time before the sun

sets completely, and use it to scout.

“Hey hey, this is a sturdy fortress. I was hoping it would be a run down place that is just a fortress in name. Is this my retribution for my usual lack of religious conviction?”

Captain Harrah joked as he held a telescope with one hand. He wanted to lean his body out from the cliff wall to take a peek, but his deputy, a petite girl jumped and push his head down.

“Idiot! They will see you if you lift your head! Make yourself smaller!”

“… I can understand if you ask me to squat or prone, but making myself smaller is an impossible request. After I hit my growth spurt when I was 9, it was already too late, and I was about my current height by the time I was 13. When I was growing up, the adults kept saying I am the descendents of ancient giants, and teased me by saying my head will break through the clouds one day. I knew they were kidding, but I really felt uneasy back then.”

“I heard that hundreds of time! Enough for my ears to get callouses!”

“Don’t be so mad, Sergeant Major Mita. What I mean is that I am envious of your convenient to carry size..”

Captain Harrah patted the brown hair of his deputy as he looked at the fort with sharp eyes in the sunset — A terrain that is suitable for defense, and a fort garrisoned by 200 soldiers. It would clearly be unwise to launch a frontal attack.

“… Hmm~ I get the gist. Let’s back off for now, and sleep til morning.”

“Oh God, this huge log don’t have any drive at all.”

“It doesn’t look like a standard that could be taken down with a surprise attack or night assault. If we do fight, we should do it in the day so the air rifles could be used effectively. And we just ended our force march, the troops must be tired.”

Contrary to his straight and to the point talking, Captain Harrah had a good grasp of the situation. After finishing his reconnaissance, he retreated to a position where the enemy wouldn’t be able to see him, and then stood up to his full six and a half foot frame, and put his convenient to carry deputy onto his shoulder.

“How infuriating! How many times do I need to tell this guy who is more useless than he looks to not carry other people so casually!”

“There’s no reason behind the urge to grab a small animal when I see it, sorry.”

The bulky officer easily carried the struggling girl on his shoulder as he walked back to their comrades.

Admist the heat and smoke, inside the forest that didn't have any traces of wild life. Second Lieutenant Matthew and the two platoon working under him welcomed the third morning after the mobile defense battle plan began.

"Have we pile on enough lumber? — Good! Splash the oil!"

After receiving their orders, the soldiers spill entire sacks of oil onto the piles of fuel stacked between the trees. This was the work to repair part of the fire wall that had extinguished. Matthew's unit alone had completed the same task five times, and they were starting to get the hang of it.

"Don't dally, hurry! Don't forget that the enemy is rushing to attack here because of this gap!"

Matthew who was busy transporting the oil used this chance to yell at the soldiers who was slowing down due to fatigue and lack of sleep… However, in terms of fatigue, he was no different from other soldiers. Ever since the sudden breakout of the civil unrest in the north, not only did they fought for several months on the Grand Arfatra Mountains, they were assigned to the retrograde support unit right after that. They had reached the limit of their fatigue so many times that there was no point in counting them.

But the fact that their group could still keep up despite this situation made Matthew very impressed with Ikuta's capability. He did his best to avoid letting the soldiers move unnecessarily, changing shifts frequently, and would insist that the troops rest when it was their turn. Their unit could only have fought so long because Ikuta stuck to this principle. If it was a mediocre officer, they would have given up from fatigue before they lose the battle.

As they hurry about their work, the splashing of the oil had already 80% completed. They could finish and retreat their work in another 5 minutes — The moment Matthew made this prediction, he noticed some unnatural shaking on the other side of the woods.

"… Ugh! Everyone fix bayonets! Stop what you are doing and watch your front!"

The soldiers heard the orders and quickly switch the bags in their hands for air shooter or bowgun, and fixing bayonets onto them. Their movement could be seen from the other side, and the soldiers from the Holy Aldera Army standing by in the trees revealed themselves.

"Enemy attack! Open fire—!"

The barrels of tens of air shooters made the air explode. With the bullets ricocheting multiple times after hitting the trees, the two sides shot at each other from a distance close enough for melee combat. However, Matthew's unit had the upper hand in terms of the number of shots.

"Have we broken their morale…? Fire troops! Set fire from the places that are done! Hurry!"

Torches were tossed into the lumber soaked in oil, and a wall of fire erupted before their eyes. The enemy who was intimidated attempted to bypass from the places that wasn't ready for burning, but Matthew already expected such a development.

“Aim that way! Fire!”

He guided his men according to the enemy’s movement, and fired a volley where the enemy was gathering in a constraint area. The dozen or so Holy Aldera Army were hit and fell into the fire.

“Alright! The enemy is retreating! Use this chance to finish the work! Quick!”

After receiving orders, the soldiers splashed oil on the 20% of the area that remains. Once that was done, the fire trooper toss in torches immediately. The flame that filled in the gap in the fire wall started burning.

“Continue firing! Don’t let the enemy come near before the flames are big enough! Fire!”

Countless bullets mercilessly forced back the enemy soldiers who were hesitating because of the intense fire. As time passes, a large number of enemy gathered on the other side of the fire wall, but the flames were too intense for them to pass through, and they couldn’t do anything to douse the fire.

“We made it… huh?”

Matthew muttered to himself in a trembling voice, wiping the cold sweat on his forehead. Three days after the plan started, the Imperial ran into their first encounter battle. They stopped the enemy invasion without serious casualties, giving him a sense of making it through right at the nick of time.

“Hah… Hahaha! How’s that! I can do something this simple too… Wahh!”

The enemy opened fire from frustration, one of the bullets whizzed past Matthew’s ears. Even though he threw himself onto the dirt and made it out safe, he could feel someone saying to him: “Steady, cool your head down”.

And so, he immediately gave up on enjoying his sense of accomplishment here.

“Pull… Pull back! This place is secured, return to stations and wait for your next orders!”

Second Lieutenant Matthew’s unit encountered the enemy when they were repairing the fire wall, and fended off the enemy after a short engagement. First Lieutenant Ikuta who took on the role of overall base commander in place of Captain Sazaruf, stuffed his breakfast of thin toast into his mouth as he received the report.

“First encounter battle after three days… Right within expectations.”

He didn’t chew probably before washing the bread down with water, then toss some cocoa leaves that serve as pain suppressants and keep his mind refreshed. Relying on these to relieve the pain from his missing finger, Ikuta he placed a piece of paper onto the board in his arm and started writing.

“Matthew’s unit are to rest for 4 hours, Yatori is to take over their mission. Repeat the order.”

“Yes Sir— Orders for Lieutenant Matthew’s unit to rest for 4 hours! Also, Lieutenant Yatori’s unit is

to take over his mission!”

Ikuta confirmed the content, and send the messenger off with his written orders. At this moment, another soldier brought him another report.

“Lieutenant, this is the report that came from the rear. The enemy is raising balloons on the furthest east side of the forest path, and gathered roughly 300 cavalry there.”

“Balloon again? And the east of the forest… I can’t tell what the enemy’s intention are. Since they sent cavalry, does that mean they want to find another detour route?”

It was hard to believe such a route existed, but ignoring this information would be too unnerving. Ikuta thought about it for a while, then ordered a soldier to summon Nanak who was standing by in the vicinity. In less than 10 minutes, her petite figure dashed into the tent.

“What is it, Ikuta! Something happened!?”

“Yes, something is bothering me. The enemy is gathering at the eastern most forest path, and even launched a balloon. What do you think they are up to?”

When she heard this news, Nanak was surprised, then pondered with her brows furrowed.

“The enemy went to the east side of the forest…? … Hmmm… Ughh… Ehhh… I don’t know what that means. The forest path is already blocked by the fire wall. Ah, but the enemy did set fire to counter that fire, so they might be waiting for the fire to burn out?”

“If that is the case, the number of soldiers isn’t enough. That’s why I was thinking if they wanted to find a detour route from the east. Even though I heard you say that it was impossible earlier…”

“Yes, I guarantee there isn’t any detour route that way, it will be a waste of time even if they search for a hundred miles.”

Nanak was absolutely sure. Even if they observed from the balloon, the chances of them finding a route even the locals didn’t know about was probably close to zero. Ikuta thought so too, and decided to not be troubled by it anymore.

“… Hmm, thank you. Thanks to your opinion, I get to dispel my unease. Sorry you have to make a trip here, you can return to your post.”

When she heard Ikuta’s thanking her and sending her off, the Shinaak chief looked at him unhappily.

“… That’s all? I already came, erm… we should do more…”

Nanak fidgeted with her fingers rubbing against each other. Unfortunately, another messenger came. She couldn’t get in the way of the report, so she had to return to her post regrettably.

Ikuta watched as Nanak’s back disappears into the distance, then he glance at the sky to the east. He

could see the balloon from this position, and the subtle feeling of unease lingered in his chest.

At the fortress on the detour route, the two forces had a few skirmishes. The unit led by Captain Sazaruf defended stubbornly like a tortoise, not letting any enemy draw near. They were now in a stalemate.

“Fighting a drawn out battle suit us just fine, but why is the opponent so passive?”

The Captain peeked at the situation of the enemy through the slit in the wall as he muttered his thoughts.

The Holy Aldera Army detachment unit attempting the detour had appeared for two days, but had not launched a proper attack even once. They would occasionally fire with their Air Rifles from long distance to disrupt the defenders, but the bullet couldn’t hit the soldiers hiding inside the fort. They would retreat immediately when the imperials counter attacked with their cannons.

Judging from the results, both sides suffered practically zero casualties. That was a good thing for Captain Sazaruf, but it was strange because of all his advantages. Things were going too well.

“… Even though the detour isn’t the main attack route, they still brought 800 men here. It only make sense to try mounting a full scale assault even if their chance of winning is below 50%…”

It would be great if they succeed, and failure would just lead to a stalemate. Unlike the defenders who would be done for if they lose, the attackers had room to venture some risk. Captain Sazaruf couldn’t tell why the enemy wasn’t using this advantage.

“Wait wait, think carefully… Thinking from another angle, not attacking means they would attack sooner or later. In other words, they are waiting for the right time and preserving their strength. The problem is that so called right time… With both forces at a stalemate, just what is the enemy waiting for? Will the situation change if they continue to wait?”

A new element that could break this stalemate might be committed here — The Captain tried to imagine what that answer could be. The first he thought of was enemy reinforcement, but his allies surveilling from the mountains would notice. Since they didn’t receive emergency light signal communications, that wasn’t the answer.

“Another thing could be… finding it too hard to attack a fact from the front, so the enemy is trying out other means of attack… Is that it?”

If that was the answer, the enemy would just be wasting their time, so Captain Sazaruf really hope that was the case — However, he suddenly realized ‘reinforcement and an attack coming from another angle’… Was the enemy waiting for the arrival of an existence that fulfilled both these criteria?

“— Captain.”



At this moment, a voice came from behind Captain Sazaruf, as if it had calculated the best moment to speak. Sazaruf turned back and saw Second Lieutenant Torway standing before him with a determined expression.

“I want to deploy my unit at the back, will you grant us permission?”

Captain Sazaruf didn’t answer immediately, not because of hesitation, but from frustration… When the intercepting unit set off, did that guy predicted the current situation? Just thinking of that stirred a feeling of fear from within him.

“… Will we be able to make it through by just doing that?”

“Yes, Ik-kun already told me what to do.”

The confident answer from the introverted youth surprised Captain Sazaruf. Right now, instead of confidence, Torway’s green eyes expressed pride. His determination was clear — Since this mission had been handed to him, the situation didn’t give Torway the luxury from answering anything else

other than ‘yes I can’.

“… Got it — Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Please place object that could provide covers at the back of the fort. But this must be done casually, don’t let the enemy know that we are keeping our guards up. Also use the chance to remind the troops to watch our backs, so they won’t be confused.”

“I will make sure of that. But it would still be dangerous if we get hit by a sneak attack.”

“I don’t plan on letting the enemy form up for the attack. Even if they did form up, it would only for a short time. The enemy would launch their attack in concert with them, so please focus on them, Captain. We will deal with the rest.”

Captain Sazaruf nodded heavily, took a deep breath and placed a hand on his subordinate’s shoulder.

“— This is the crucial moment. Do your best, Torway Remeon.”

Torway looked straight into Sazaruf’s eyes and responded to his encouragement with a salute.

Passing through the fort and heading along the eastern path, one would reach a path formed by the ridge. It was 1,500m above sea level, not very high. Because it was this low, vegetation could grow here and it escape the fate of becoming a bald mountain like the Grand Arfatra Mountains where the chilly wind blows.

“— Halt.”

These conditions were just right for the phantoms who wanted to avoid drawing attention as they head towards their destination. They shy away from the muddy grounds with good footing, and bashed through the vegetation, only reaching the edge of the ridge after some time. They could see the scenery right under them from here.

The fort on a mountainous terrain, where the peaks were 200m aparts, and one could see everything clearly if they look down at the fort. The lack of defence made the shadows laugh gleefully. They spent four days maneuvering cautiously, and could finally deal a painful blow to the back of the imperial defenders on this detour route.

“This is the best position to fire from, should we begin the attack immediately, Commander?”

“I concur. Lead the melee units down the mountain path and standby there. The moment the enemy falls into confusion when we open fire, launch the attack.”

“Understood… Commander, are you going to direct the shooting unit here personally?”

“Because of the importance of this mission, I will be staying here. Give me your long range gun

barrel."

The deputy took out air rifle from his back and handed it to the commander. The head of the shadows switched his short barrel with the long barrel handed to him, then attached his partner wind sprite onto the long barrel. His deputy besides him did the same thing after receiving the short barrel.

"… Then, I shall lead the 40 men melee team down the mountain path."

After his deputy reported that, he moved back along the grass patch they traversed earlier. The rest of the 80 shadows formed ranks along the mountain path under the command of their head, everyone observing the situation inside the fort below them with their air rifle in hand.

The imperials were focusing their attention on the enemy in front of them, who were led by Captain Harrah, and didn't guard their backs, against the assault that would come from high grounds. But even if they noticed, they couldn't do anything about them.

When faced with an opponent on the ridge of a hill 200m away, it would be impossible to counter attack from the fort. Even if it devolves into a shootout between Air Rifles, the shadows who have wider vision from above would have the overwhelming advantage.

Also, even if they send troops here, the distance to the ridge of the hill would make the enemy soldier great targets. Not just the fort, even the road behind the fort was within the range of the shadows. How many soldiers would survive the rain of bullets and make it to the hill ridge?

The head of the shadows used the short gap before the melee team finish their movement to confirm, and couldn't find anything to worry about. No, the moment he receive news of this plan from the pigeon, he had not felt uneasy about it. Because the name of the proposer, Major Jean Arkinex was someone he pledges unwavering trust and loyalty to.

With nothing else to consider, his thoughts turned to his memory of red — that engagement that lasted only four rounds, and lasted less than ten seconds. But even til now, he could still remember that chill which made his hair stood on ends clearly.

"… Vermillion hair… The daughter of House Igsem…"

The phantom who should understand that silence was a virtue said unconsciously. And so, he had no choice but to admit that encounter with the vermillion haired girl had captured his heart and body.

"… Dual blades… Swords…"

The head of the phantoms muttered to himself, then looked at the air rifle in his hands. Even though he understand it held the power to revolutionize the battlefield, and he could wield it better than anyone else — Deep in his heart, he was still looking down at this thing, treating it as a toy that couldn't be used on the big stage.

—Not just that.

He suppressed his urge to say it out loud, but couldn't stop the scream in his heart.

The weapon I am proficient in, the proud weapon the Yaponicks should use isn't something like this —

"Commander, the melee unit have reached the mountain path."

He was pulled back from his obsessive thoughts by the voice of his subordinates. Shaking his head to chase away the distractions in his mind, he regain his self as the leader of the Phantom Unit, confirm that everything was set and ordered:

"Prepare to attack, fire on my mark."

Heeding his command, the 80 men lay lay prone in an entire row, and place their fingers onto the trigger. The moment they squeeze the triggers, the imperial soldiers who exposed their unguarded backs would fall into hell.

"Ready your guns, aim—"

The moment he was about to countdown, a 'splat' rang out — He heard the sound of a hard object shattering. It was followed by the noise of a heavy object falling. The head of the shadows who didn't understand what was happening turned his eyes towards the source.

One of his comrade drooped his head. The soldier who he just spoke with maintained his prone position with a gun in his hands, but he didn't say anything as he kept his face down. What is this moron doing — He didn't need to admonish him, because blood was starting to pool around the spot where his head was touching the ground.

"Ughh—!"

The sound of a hard object shattering was that of a bullet piercing a skull. The moment he realized this, several similar sound rang out around him. Many of his comrades didn't change their position much, just that their live had faded away.

"Huh… What…? What is happening… Ugghhh!"

"Hey! Why are you lowering your head all of a sudden… Don't joke with me…!"

"That's a shot! We are being shot at! From where…!"

With unease spreading, the head of the shadows swept his eyes over every corner of the scenery he could see… From the accuracy of the sniping, it couldn't have came from the fort. This attack came from somewhere with a wider field of vision, on a higher ground…"

"… What is that—"

That speculation wasn't overturned, he found the answer shortly later.

"… There are enemy soldiers ambushing on the opposite ridge…!"

"Continue firing! Pick your own targets, snipe the enemy you can see!"

On the opposite side of the valley where the fort was, Torway and his 40 men were shooting at the hills before them. Even though they were a bit more than 200m from the enemy, it was within range of their Air Rifles. And they held the initiative from the surprise attack, and had been attacking one sidedly all this while.

And of course, the enemy wouldn't take the hits quietly, and had fired at the people on the ridge opposite them. However, the retaliation attack won't have much effects. The reason was clear, because Torway's group were spread out all over the place.

"They adopted a tight formation as expected…! We can win!"

Torway who was sure his side had the advantage squeezed the trigger. Through his sights, he could see another enemy falling off the ridge after being shot in the head.

Historically, the formation for wind gunners were always tight. As they lacked the accuracy of Air Rifles, they had to increase the compactness of their bullets to make up for that flaw.

But with the debut of the new weapon, the Air Rifle, there was no need to insist on using a tight formation. As their accuracy were guaranteed either way, while spreading out would deter the enemy from concentrating their fire, it would be better to disperse one's unit to a certain extent before attacking. By executing this idea, Torway's unit held the upper hand despite facing an enemy twice their numbers.

"… The enemy is retreating! Don't let them escape! We have to whittle down their combat potential as much as possible here!"

The phantoms judged the situation to be against their favour, so they stopped their attack and begin to run. This was the best chance Torway's men had been waiting for. The enemy was lying prone on the ground in order to take aim, but they had to stand up in order to retreat. Which means their target would increase in size for an instant.

"Haha, this is like shooting ducks…! The legendary Phantom Unit is nothing special!"

"Those guys are falling one by one! Serve you right! Become real phantoms!"

His subordinates were making such statements, but Torway had no intention of taking his opponents lightly… the difference in formation was just a superficial reason. He knew very well that his side was at a disadvantage, it just happen that a person behind him devised such a high quality plan.

"— Listen up Torway. On the third day after your unit reaches the fort, or at dawn of the fourth day, that Phantom Unit will attack from behind. This prediction is almost 100% accurate."

Ikuta said with certainty to the person he practically dragged into the base tent. When he heard that, Torway was dumbfounded.

"… Why… Why are you so certain? After we were attacked some time again, we have yet to come into contact with the Phantom Unit again, is there any sightings from our allies to the rear?"

"If you think about it logically, you will arrive at this conclusion. There isn't time to explain too much, so just keep up — What do you think the objectives of the Phantom Unit is?"

"Erm… Support the Holy Aldera Army's invasion of the Grand Arfatra Mountains?"

"To provide support, what should they do?"

"Disrupt our defensive strategies, I think there are many ways to do that…"

"That's right. But in actual fact, those guys didn't obstruct our plans even once. Why is that?"

Torway hesitated, wondering how to answer, but Ikuta told him the answer immediately.

"It's not anything difficult, it's simply because the terrain here isn't easy to attack."

"… Ah…"

"Their combat strength is a company of 200 men at most. Even if they tried a frontal assault, they will be counter attacked by us. In that case, they need to adopt a 'launching a sneak attack when the opportunity shows itself, then retreat immediately', that sort of hit and run tactic. But the precondition for this to work is that they can't be detected by the enemy before the surprise attack. For this terrain, that precondition is impossible to realize."

"Indeed, the field of vision here is too good. They need to trek back a long distance to get to a terrain suitable for taking cover, and we have allies surveilling the area from the mountains behind. It would take a lot of effort just to find a place that could see this place and has cover to hide. If their soldiers gather at the same spot, we would notice immediately."

"That is so. In such an environment, even those guys couldn't get close to Air Rifles range, at most they could stay in a place where they could barely see the area. They should be spreading their members out and hiding at the back. On a map, that should be this area."

After Ikuta finished, he drew a small circle on the map of the mountain range. Anymore forward, they wouldn't be able to hide their tracks, any further back and they won't be able to keep watch over the defender's movement. The area within the circle balanced these conditions with it's excellent terrain.

"The fact that this area is hard to attack would never change, but just for today, one condition is different."

Torway lifted his head suddenly, feeling that he is starting to understand what Ikuta was implying.

"…Captain Sazaruf and I would be leading our troops to the detour route…"

"That's right, for the enemy, this is the chance they have been waiting for. Even though there was no chance for them to act in this base, there are less soldiers at the fort, and our allies aren't watching the area. Those guys will definitely switch their target to you all."

"Is that so… However, what is the reason for them to attack on the third or fourth day?"

"To evade our surveilance, they would head to the west and take a longer route than you. I already marked their predicted route on this map, no matter which route they choose, they would be much slower by the time you reach the fort. As for why the attack would be in the day, it's because the Air Rifle's range would be most effective during day time."

Starting from the deduced position of the Phantom Unit, he used his fingers to trace their route until the fort… The time taken would be either the 3rd day or the morning of the 4th day. Ikuta limited the possible position of the enemy within the specified time frame.

It was the same back then… Torway thought. As the simulation battle with Captain Sarihasrag draws to an end, Ikuta made an amazing prediction of the situation in order to rescue the kidnapped princess. As if he was playing chess blindfolded, he had the unbelievable skill to grasp the movement of the enemy and allies. And compared to last time, the scale of the time and place had been increased significantly.

A chill went down Torway's spine. If… If this prediction was accurate—

"Hey, don't daze off. Any questions?"

This voice pulled Torway back to reality. He organized his thoughts so far hurriedly.

"… What about the possibility of the enemy attacking without relying on long range shooting? Last time, a unit charged right into the center of our formation…"

"If we base solely on the intelligence from Nana, there isn't any terrain where such an acrobatic attack could be launched. The fort was constructed on a valley between two ridges, there are cliffs on either side of it, and behind it is a one long path that lead into the mountain. I don't see any route for them to sneak in close. Even if there is, we just need to watch that route closely."

"I see… Then, I want to get back to the main topic. With an enemy attacking the back of the fort from long range, how should our unit engage them?"

At this point of the discussion, Torway could tell that his mission was to intercept them. Before answering this question, Ikuta peeked at the entrance of the tent. He was probably concerned about the time? It felt as if ten minutes or so had passed since they started their discussion.

"First, we need to turn the chessboard. If you are the commander of the Phantom Unit, how would you attack this fort?"

"… Taking long range shooting into consideration. The crucial factor for the entire question would be where to deploy the gunners. I will survey the surrounding terrain, pick a spot about 150m away from the fort, where there is a clear line of fire. Whether there is cover in that place would be important too."

The youngest son of House Remeon answered fluently, his model student performance put his teacher at ease.

"Since you understand this much, I just need to repeat your previous question — when facing an enemy that is attacking in such a way, how would your unit engage them?"

"— Just like this, Ik-kun…!"

And so the situation developed to this very moment, the bullets fired from 40 Air Rifles flew over the valley and brought death to their enemy. Basing his plan on the youth's prediction that the phantom would attack, Torway took charge of the battle that ensured.

He quickly deduced that the enemy the venue the enemy would deploy. Working backwards from the issue of bullet trajectory and positioning from the mountain path, there was no other answer aside from the ridge to south of the fort. And so, he found the place he should take to engage the enemy. He need to find a spot within the range of the air rifle that was on higher ground than the enemy, with vegetation for his soldiers to spread out and hide themselves.

The place that fit these condition was a slope to the north of the enemy, slightly to the west. The hardest part was letting soldiers scale the place. Unlike the southern ridge, there wasn't any mountain path that leads to the northern ridge. Even though they had to scale cliffs to reach that position, they overcome it with the assistance of the Shinaaks.

Until the very end, the Phantom Unit didn't notice the troops ambushing on the hill opposite them. It was true that they were more proficient than anyone else in using Air Rifles, but they never expected a situation where both sides were using the same weapons. They became arrogant because of the advantage of their new weapon which only their own army had, and unconsciously stopped their thinking.

Ikuta claimed — Because of its long range, the new era of shooting battles would evolved into a competition in predicting the enemy's deployed position. The attackers would naturally choose a spot that was suitable for bringing all their shooters to bear, and the defenders would need to deduce where the enemy would shoot from and engage them.

Counter sniping. The descendent of 'Remeon of the Guns' understood this concept completely.

"Lieutenant, the enemy is fleeing…!"

He could see the remnants of the enemy who suffered heavy losses were retreating along the ridge to the east. However, Torway did not plan for 'forcing the enemy to retreat without suffering any casualties' to be a victory.

"… Phew—!"

He lift his air rifle with both knees on the ground and stop his breathing. The distance with the enemy had already exceeded the specification of the scope. The only thing he could count on was his own skill. The pride as a 'Remeon of the guns' that had been branded deeply into his very bones.

In the silence that follows after concentrating to the limit, Torway squeezed the trigger. Taking the wind into consideration, he had aimed slightly to the right, the bullet flew at a trajectory that achieved a balanced with the gravity pulling it down.

He couldn't confirm if the bullet hit. However, the instant the hunter fired, he was certain that the shot would be embedded into the side abdomen of the phantom.

"… I won't let any of you go."

He didn't say that in the spur of the moment. The platoon of 40 gunners ambushing on this ridge were armed with Air Rifles, while the wind gunners that stayed behind in the fort was a platoon of 33 men armed with Air Shooters. Torway's unit consist of 107 wind gunners. Where was the other 34 gunners?

"— Ugh — Ah…!"

During the retreat, the leader of the phantom unit felt searing heat on his side abdomen. His knees felt weak, but he couldn't stop and kept running… The act of abandoning the remains of his comrades was an absolute disgrace for the phantoms.

"How many did we lose…?"

"There are more than 40 dead or heavily injured…! Half the unit is down!"

When he heard the number that far exceeds his expectation, the head of the shadows groaned. After the enemy attacked preemptively, the time was wasted trying to grasp the situation, the time wasted on attempting a counterattack, the time wasted on getting up from a prone position to retreat… This number mercilessly reflected the time they wasted, which was severe enough to consider his unit destroyed.

"… Tch! We will lie low again, and wait for the next chance. We are not allowed such an unsightly…"

The head of the shadows said as he continued running ahead. He didn't realized that he had lost his cool from the impact of the defeat and the pain in the side of his abdomen. It was too early to consider his next course of action. That's because they had yet to escape their hellish situation.

"What—"

His retribution for his lack of wariness took shape in the form of the imperial soldier ranks blocking the path on the ridge, and appearing before their eyes.

The phantoms stopped in their tracks. On the ridge with nowhere to run, 34 muzzles were pointed at them. All of them understood that the situation was hopeless… They should have noticed sooner that the instant they escaped from that hell-like prologue, they had become the hunted.

"Fire—!"

With the order, bullets fired after the compressed air exploded. The phantoms had no other choice other than taking the direct hit.

"— Hey hey, are you kidding me?"

Captain Harrah saw the entire battle that took place within this short amount of time through his telescope. Even the retreat of his allies and how they were mercilessly shot down from the direction they were running.

"That phantom Unit is actually being attacked before they could strike…!"

He gritted his teeth and lowered his telescope. Despite facing an unbelievable reality, he didn't have time to daze around. Even though the sure win tactic didn't work, he still had his responsibility as a commander.

"… No other way, let's attack, Sergeant Major Mita. They deployed some of their men to ambush, so their forces are scattered right now."

"Huhhh!? The ambushing unit will rush back soon right?"

"That's why we have to take down the fort immediately! Alright, let's go!"

Captain Harrah carried his deputy on his shoulder without warning, and ran back to his unit. With a bitter heart, he ordered a general attack, knowing it would probably fail. He had no other option to choose from.

The fourth night after the commencement of the mobile defence plan. Ikuta who was in command of the main base received good news from the west.

"… Is that so, Torway accomplished his mission."

After hearing the report from the messenger, Ikuta felt the weight on his shoulder lightening a little. According to his plan, the duel with the Phantom Unit was the climax of this campaign.

"Sorry, but I need you to make a trip back, can you send my reply with light signals? Tell them — 'Well done, start pulling back after defending the fort for three more days'."

The messenger left quickly after receiving the message. When the back of the other party disappeared into the darkness, another person was illuminated by Kus' Lantern light.

“Platoon Yatori completed the burning works for the second zone in the west. There was an encounter battle during the mission, and the Shinaaks helping with our work suffered three casualties, but I have sent all casualties directly to the field hospital.”

“Thank you for your hard work, but the enemy’s blood that was spilled on you is already hardening.”

“It feels uncomfortable, but it’s the same for everyone else — By the way, about that report earlier…”

Yatori was about to ask when Ikuta’s stomach suddenly rumbled loudly. It was so loud that even the subject himself opened his eyes wide.

“… Oh no, I can’t remember when was the last time I ate.”

“You haven’t eaten? Dinner time for the troops should have been long over.”

“I remember ordering the men to eat… But thinking about it now, maybe the only thing I stuffed into my mouth since morning are cocoa leaves.”

As if it was trying to emphasize this fact, the youth’s stomach groaned again. Yatori turned with a face of resignation.

“Wait here, I will get something from the food provisions tent.”

“My thanks. If possible, can you let me see the menu?”

“Unfortunately, the shop only sells toast, dried fruits and meat jerky.”

Yatori answered jokingly and ran off. In less than a minute, she returned with a bundle. Ikuta who had been sitting in a chair inside the base tent without moving stood up.

“It’s boring to eat alone, can you join me? Since you only reported your work being finished now, you probably haven’t eaten a proper dinner yet, right?”

“I plan to eat too and got enough for two. It’s a pity that Matthew and Haroma aren’t here..”

After finishing their conversation, Ikuta sat onto the floor, then Yatori sat as she leaned against his back. This back to back position might seem strange to others, but for the two of them, it was a position they had been used to since their schooling days.

Unable to see each other’s faces, the two of them felt the body warm from their back started eating.

“Is the report from the messenger earlier related to Torway and the fort?”

“Yes, seems like he dealt a heavy blow to the phantoms. Compliment him a little the next time you see him.”

“? Why should I compliment him? You are the one who taught him that tactic.”

“I can’t do it, praising that pretty boy is beyond the limits of my mental capacity.”

Yatori who didn’t seem to care after hearing the reason bit the dried almond in her hand.

“… Did he take out the enemy commander?”

“No idea. According to the report, the enemy attempted an assault with over a hundred men, more of half of them were killed. The guys attempting to shoot from long distance with Air Rifles were almost wiped out, I heard the melee unit who came out in the end to help them also took heavy casualties before escaping. There were many bodies left on the field, but as those people claim to be phantoms, it is uncertain whether the commander wore anything to differentiate himself.”

Ikuta bit off some meat jerky as he answered. Yatori swallowed the dried fruit in her mouth and then said:

“… Did he stole the prize?”

“Maybe. You wanted to avenge Warrant Officer Deinkun?”

When she heard Ikuta say that without holding back, Yatori sighed with a wry smile.

“Yes, that’s one of the reason. It’s all because I didn’t defeat that man earlier. If that is the case until the very end, I won’t be able to lift my head and move forward as a knight when I pay my respects at Warrant Officer Deinkun’s grave some day.”

“Torway will cover for you for this mission too, he is also an exemplary imperial knight.”

“That is true… It is Torway’s win this time.”

Yatori said as she caress the sheath of the dual sword she unfastened and placed onto the ground when she sat down.

“… Looking at it from a wider viewpoint, maybe the time to ascertain who won and who lost have passed. Just like your announcement that it would revolutionize the battlefield, the Air Rifles possess overwhelming power. Once that thing gets mass produced and adopted by others, the way war is fought would be completely different.”

“That isn’t something that only happened now. The Air Shooter was evaluated the same way in the past; if we go further back, even the invention of the bowgun brought a big impact to the soldiers then. I think your House also left some record logs about that period.”

“You mean the piece about ‘knocking bolts away with a sword’… But that piece didn’t do anything aside from preserving the dignity of the Igsem. This is a skill worthy of praise, but most of the soldiers couldn’t reproduce it. Since that is the case, it can’t be consider an improvement in military terms.”

“Indeed, both the bowgun and air shooter are not reliant on the skill of the user. For an army that wants to standardize the abilities of its soldiers, it would be better if the weapon is easy to use.”

“That’s right, easy to use should be the minimum criteria… However, aside from its similarities to bowgun and Air Shooter, the Air Rifle also have another decisive improvement.”

Yatori opened her palms and held them wide apart to express the improvement she meant.

“That is the distance. The capability to target an opponent more than 100m away, that would change the sense of distance between the enemy and us on the battlefield in the future.”

Ikuta shut his mouth on reflex. Because only Yatori herself had the rights to discuss what would happen next.

“On the battlefield that is mainly fought through the exchange of fire from a distance, the chance of a melee battle would decrease a lot.”

The descendant of ‘Igsem of the Sword’ said the conclusion broad mindedly:

“The age of the sword is coming to an end — isn’t it too late to say this? Before the debut of Air Rifles, Pikes, Bows and Bowguns all shook the status of the sword. If the age of the sword had already ended, maybe all this while, it can be described as a gradual decline towards its end.”

Ikuta who didn’t move as he listened to the confession coming from behind him chose his words carefully before speaking calmly:

“… ‘Remeon of the Guns’ will replace ‘Igsem of the Swords’ as the star of the battlefield . It is true that the debut of the Air Rifles would be the critical factor. However… I don’t want to make excuses as the one who contributed on the technological aspect, but I don’t think this is a bad thing for you.”

“Ara? Why? Even though I don’t think of it as bad news…”

“Because you are carrying an overly heavy burden, so reducing that burden would be good news to me.”

When she heard this answer, Yatori smiled and lean back gently to knock the back of the youth’s head.

“Did you forget my burden that gets lightened would fall onto Torway?”

“It’s fine to transfer it all to him. If it’s your burden, that happy would be happy to accept it. From the looks of things, his tolerance to take on these responsibility is growing too.”

“The one who is nurturing him shouldn’t be saying that… Could the reason why you lend a helping hand to Torway in all sorts of way since your enlistment for laying the foundation for promoting the use of Air Rifles?”

“Well… I did have similar ideas, but my motivation is weak, so it felt like necessity led to this result.

The outbreak of the northern uprising and my position as a 'disciple of Aranai' entrusted with the information resulted in the Air Rifles being brought in at this point in time. I think this is just the end result of a combination of these factors."

"That's true, you merely hastened the pace of the hands on the clock…"

Yatori sighed. The youth hesitated a moment before continuing:

"Then… Assuming — If everything that happened is because I wanted to lessen your burden, will you get angry?"

"I didn't ask that of you, but I won't get mad. Because I have a feeling myself… that one day, the times will leave the Igsem behind."

The fiery haired girl lamented as she cast her gaze into the distance, looking up at the twinkling stars in the night sky.

"— You heard stories about dogs that continue to guard the house even after its master had passed away right?"

"However, what is the truth behind these stories? Maybe the dog simply didn't know its master is dead. Or maybe, it believe that if it continues to guard the place, the corpse would rise again one day even though it is rotting and infested with maggots."

It would be silly to ask what the metaphor was about. Ikuta bit his lips when he thought about how she felt.

"Even though they are known as the 'Three Loyal Houses', The Igsem is conservative, Remeon is innovative and the Eurugous is moderate. As the Igsem's principle is that 'soldiers won't meddle with politics', so it isn't accurate to critique them as conservative… However, the existence of the Igsem have turned into the watchdog of the Empire's current government, which is the fact."

"… Igsem and Remeon maintained different positions and attitude. Historically, they had opposed each other plenty of times because of this."

"Yes. But despite that, they had your House had held on for this long. Because of the great performance that couldn't be emulated by others on the battlefield, and their support of the emperor in the past to unite the land, the common consensus recognize Igsem as the head of the 'Three Loyal Houses'… However, as their performance on the battlefield gradually fall behind Remeon, they would not be able to keep their status as the leader of the old military families with their historical authority alone."

At the same time, the balance of the imperial powers would change. Igsem losing power will lead to the conservatives having less influence, and the rise of the Remeon will invigorate the innovatives — before the discussion about the merits of innovation can start, the biggest problem would be the

opposition period before that. For Kioka, that would be the best chance to invade, which they have been waiting for.

The Emperor will pass away soon — Ikuta remembered the news he got from Princess Charmille. He had been told that at that time, the corrupt nobles would take sides against each other. The opposition between the Igsem and Remeon would probably overlap at the same time. The political and military affairs of the Empire would fall apart at the same time.

“Am I really protecting the Empire right now? Can I continue to protect it in the future — Even a watchdog can’t help thinking about these things.”

Yatori kept looking at the night sky as she spoke — She didn’t know that the Emperor don’t have much time left. But with the north and east of the Empire exposed to the threat of other nations, just the matter of the military splitting up was enough to make her worry.

There wasn’t much time to hesitate. What should she fight, and what should she protect? When that time comes, she would be forced to make a choice.

“Father said that the reason for Igsem’s existence is to ‘remain unchanged even when the era does’. If that is so, there is nothing to worry about. Maybe Torway who is sharpening his claws right now will become the weapon to take me down in the future.”

“I won’t let that ending become reality, so you can spend a lot of time to brood over it.”

Ikuta answered determinely. The strong and firm voice made Yatori really happy, and she shut her eyes as if she was in a dream.

“If never changing is Igsem’s reason of being, then ever changing would be Yatorishino’s reason of being. I know you won’t escape from any of this. No matter what your conclusion is, I know it would be the an honourable one. So —”

Ikuta forcefully suppressed the urge to charge ahead with his rational mind, and explained what he thought:

“— So I will help you reach a conclusion that would lead to a better future. I will stay by your side, until the day you can live on with your head held high.”

Ikuta who was gazing at the stars during the middle of the war made one of the biggest promise of his life. But Yatori didn’t say anything… She simply pushed a little bit more of her weight onto the youth.

The next day, with the successful implementation of the mobile defence plan, time passes by slowly. Even though the number of gaps within the fire wall showed a trend of increasing, but considering the fact that there were just two days left, it wasn’t serious enough enough for them to hold on to the end.

In this four days, Ikuta did well as a commander. Without any manpower to spare, the way he maintain the work progress and avoid overworking the troop was really skillful. As for the commander himself who didn’t have anyone to cover his duty, he had no other choice but to stave off

his fatigue by catching a wink between his work and stuffing cocoa leaves into his mouth.

“Damn it, just imagining how I should slack off in the future to make up for this fills me with expectations…”

Pus was forming on his little finger’s wound, and he could feel stinging pain intermittently. In order to not let the pain show on his face, he had to put in exceptional effort.

“— Eh? Sorry, did you say something to me?

“Sorry, I’m just muttering to myself — Hmm~ Your unit need to transport 10 sack of oil and as much straw as you can from here to the second zone in the east. After doing that, chop the woods there to top up the supply of lumber. After that… Cough cough, wait a minute, my throat is dry.”

With the sun showing no signs of waning, it was now 2pm in the afternoon. As Ikuta was drinking water to hydrate his patched throat, a messenger charged in while panting hard.

“Lieutenant Ikuta — reporting! Enemy reinforcement on the other side of the forest has arrived!”

When he heard that, the youth spit out the water in his mouth. Sergeant Major Suya who was unluckily sitting before him screamed, but Ikuta didn’t have time to care and questioned the messenger.

“Wait, I understand if they approach gradually, but how did they get there suddenly?”

“It seems that they made a huge detour from the east, so our allies from the mountains couldn’t track their movement until they have almost reached.”

“That means they intentionally took a detour? What’s the scale of the reinforcement?”

“About 100 men… but they had six wagons with them.”

Ikuta started thinking about these two unexpected information — 100 men won’t change the situation much, and that was why he couldn’t read the enemy’s intention. Since the reinforcement reached at such a time, that mean this was a detachment force ordered to take the long way around when they set off. What does this mean?

“… Did that reinforcement unit link up with the enemy main forces immediately after arrival?”

“No, the place they reach is the east of the forest… Around the area where that balloon is.”

“Near the east most forest path… Even though there is only one balloon going up and down, there are cavalry wandering around there. What about the cavalry?”

“They are doing the same thing, running back and forth meaninglessly.”

The knot he felt in his mind yesterday surfaced again, and the feeling that something was wrong grew more intense. Ikuta folded his arms in deep thought.

“Yah*, thanks for your hard work. Well done in making it here before sunset, gentlemen.”

At the same time, to the east of the Gagarukasakan forest. Jean gave compliments without any reservations to the reinforcements who push themselves hard to reach this place with six wagons in tow.

“I would very much want like you to rest, but we have pressing matters, please indulge me for a while more — Air trooper Sergeant Hasantha, are you here?”

The Kiokian soldier Jean named ran before him immediately. After facing the soldier, the white haired officer cast his gaze to the right side of his back apologetically. In that place was a balloon filled with gas and secured to the ground with heavy objects.

“I am sorry to ask this of you when you are so tired, but I want your team to take that balloon and direct the artillery. As you can see, the enemy is on the other side of the forest, we can’t see where the rounds land from the ground.”

“Yes Sir!… This means we will be using the cargo immediately?”

“Syah*! That’s right, we will use all six. The observation would take quite a bit of effort, please send us the message via light signals, we will adjust the troops on the ground accordingly.”

After receiving his orders, the soldier ran off to gather his comrades. Lieutenant Miara who just arrived saw the soldier leave, and she stopped before her superior officer before dismounting.

“Reporting, the cavalry is ready, Major Arkinex.”

“Nice work. Has everyone memorize that route with their body?”

“I think they are good enough to maneuver through it blindfolded… Jean, are you really joining in?”

“Hah*, of course. I don’t want to stay here by myself and get lectured by General Akugarpa.”

“… Compared to us, the amount of time you spent practising is less than half of ours. If you take the field like this, if anything happens…”

“Nyatt*! Have you forgotten who your horsemanship instructor is? And I recall overcoming obstacles more difficult than this numerous times during exhibitions.”

Before her superior who had a face full of confidence, Miara sighed and gave up on convincing him.

“In that case, I won’t stop you. Please don’t fall off along the way. It would be a lot of hassle to rescue in the sea of fire, even for me.”

While they were talking, the soldiers around them finished unloading the cargo from the wagons. Each

of the six wagons carried one piece of cargo, steel cannons that could only be described as massive. It resembles the largest calibre of wind cannons, but it was larger than wind cannons and the barrel was much thicker. On top of that, there were several metallic accessories, cleaning equipment and a gun mount with wheels.

“It had been a while since we used it, so maybe we should be the one who should feel uneasy — Mum*, the sun is setting, hurry it up! Push the cannons that are set up into the forest path!”

“It will be done in no time at this pace, I will get the cavalry ready.”

Miara mounted her horse after saying that, and return to the cavalry stationed behind. The artillery soldiers were working smoothly, and after mounting the main body of the cannon onto the gun mount, they pulled it with horses and head straight to the forest path.

It was thanks to the Holy Aldera Army adopting the tactic of fighting fire with fire. The fire wall blocking the forest path to the eastern edge of the Gagarukasakan forest had become very thin. But even so, there was more than a hundred meters of road on fire. Infantry won’t be able to breakthrough, but it was close enough for cannons to hit the other side.

“—Yah*, the six cannons are arranged neatly in a line.”

Inside the forest path, some distance from the flames and smog, six giant cannons were placed in a line. Normally, they would take up more space than the forest path, but the grounds had been widened and flattened before hand.

“This was brought to Aldera in order to showcase its effectiveness, but the six cannons received unexpected resistance from them, and was thrown into the warehouse to accumulate dust… Even though It didn’t have the chance to be used in public today, but its chance to shine have finally come.”

With the 300 cavalry following behind in a single row, Jean who was mounted on a horse besides Miara said with a frank attitude. The artillery soldiers before him had already prepared their wind and fire sprites, and was awaiting their orders.

“Load!”

With that command, the soldiers finally started preparing to shoot the cannon. They first inserted the brush into the muzzle to clean the interior, then loaded in an oval shell so big, that it required both arms to lift, into the barrel.

“Inject Dynamic Air!”

The artillery soldiers with fire sprites fed their partner water, then placed their hand onto the ‘fire hole’ on the hands of their sprite. They gave the impossible order to ‘light fire’, and the fire sprites that couldn’t harm their master or ignore the order made a strange compromise. This produce ‘dynamic air’ which were based on their ability to create ‘spark’. The soldiers immediately slot the sprite’s hands into the nozzle, using tube made from resin to direct the dynamic air. The dynamic air would flow along the tube to the hole on the wind sprite’s back used for air intake and exhaust. The

wind sprite would use it's 'wind tunnel' to suck the air into the cannon, compressing it under high pressure.

"Aim!"

The soldiers look through the aim sights marked with crosshairs, and adjusted the attack direction of the cannons. As they don't have a direct sight on the target, they will be adjust their aim by using the first shot as reference, and targeted the far end of the forest path.

"Fire!"

A heavy partition inside the cannons dropped. This break the contact with the wind sprite, and the friction would create spark with the same principle as striking flints. This provide the decisive stimulation to the flammable gas that had been filled to its limit.



The sky was clear, but most of the imperial soldiers mistook the sound for thunder.

"…… Ugh!"

Ikuta realized the disturbing truth and his face turned green. A situation that shouldn't happen happened. There was no need to turn the reason into words, the facts were clear to see.

"… The rear should be able to see the situation in the east side! Any communication from them!?"

Ikuta swivelled his sights to his back, searching for the figure of the messenger, and found a soldier charging towards him at full speed to report. When he reached the commanding officer, the soldier didn't waste time catching his breath and said:

"Re… Report…! There is an artillery bombardment shot over the fire wall at the easternmost forest path…!"

That sound came from the east again, as if it was attempting to cover the voice of the messenger. The troops were starting to waver too.

"How many cannons? Are the soldiers in the trenches alright? We knew from the beginning that the forest path there is very direct, so we should have done anti-artillery preparations!"

"The… The number of cannons and casualties are unknown. But according to the report, the trenches…"

"Trenches…?"

Ikuta repeated the messenger's words as a question. The soldier seemed to bracing himself to say out a taboo phrase, then answered fearfully:

"They say that the trenches built to withstand artillery were destroyed with just one hit…!"

On the other hand, in the Holy Aldera Army headquarters, General Akugarpa who was shocked by the thundering sound dashed out of his tent.

"What is that sound… Is that brat behind this?"

Unlike the incident with the balloon, Jean didn't inform Akugarpa beforehand… His actions in raising the balloon earned the ire of many officers, and the white-haired officer had been bestowed an empty supervising mission, and isolated in the east of the forest. However, that was the explanation on the surface. The truth was, General Akugarpa kept him away from the main forces in order to make it convenient for Jean who didn't want to be hindered by religious taboos to act.

"The interval between each boom is too orderly for it to be thunder… General, I don't think this is possible, but is this…"

Lieutenant Colonel Michelin's gut feeling made him frown, and his superior also thought about that

‘unlikely possibility’.

“… It is obviously too large to be transported with the other cargo, just how did they brought it here? And that thing should be dumped into the warehouse inside the base, when was it taken out?”

“Instead of racking our brains here, we should ask the man himself. Shall we go, General?”

The adjutant said as he pointed to the entrance of the tent, but General Akugarpa shook his head after thinking it over, showing a sour expression on his face.

“… It’s too late to stop him now, it wouldn’t do us any good even if we admonish that brat. And this is probably the ace up that brat’s sleeve. Since we can’t breakthrough here or in the western detour route, letting him do as he wish would be for the best.”

“Will the officers accept this? Maybe someone will rush to them and complain, just like that time with the balloon.”

“Don’t worry, there isn’t anyone in our army who could say for certain what that sound is. Even we only did so after seeing the actual thing and imagining it from our memories, most of the soldiers won’t even understand what had happen.”

“Even so, if someone deduced that Major Arkinex is behind this, they might confront him directly. For example, Colonel Gisspa might do that.”

“There is no way I can account for everything! … And the other problems aside, since they made such large noises so brazantly, they are probably beyond the point of caring about others nagging at him. That brat isn’t someone who would make such a mistake.”

General Akugarpa decided to ignore this, and bend his waist to sit firmly into his chair. Lieutenant Colonel Michelin sighed as he took the empty glass from his superior’s hand, then prepared the next cup of tea without a single word.

There shouldn’t be any thunderclouds in the sky. That’s what the soldiers hiding in the crumbling trenches thought.

The powerful unknown impact fell from the sky repeatedly, destroying the trenches used to defend against cannon shots like paper mache, even the soldiers inside them were hit. How long would such a tragedy continue? The soldiers didn’t know either.

“… Has it stopped… yet…?

However, that phenomenon seemed to have come to an end. With the pressure on top of their base lightened, the soldiers got up timidly and looked around them.

It was terrible. Three of the four trenches had collapsed, and they could hear the soldiers buried alive

with the corpses groaning inside. Other places were heavily damaged too, and there were three fellow soldiers who lost the bottom half of their bodies from something like a 'lightning' like attack.

"… What happened… Are those… cannon shots…?"

That 'something' not only murdered his comrades horribly, it left deep craters on the ground. The soldier drew near and peeked into the holes. It was half buried in the earth, but the quality of the steel couldn't be anything else but cannon rounds.

However, he couldn't believe that this terrible situation was wrecked by cannon fire. In the soldier's mind, wind cannons weren't weapons that could unleashed such destruction like the wrath of the gods, they were not weapons that could destroy the sturdy trenches along with the soldiers.

"I… I have to save them…"

The moans of casualties came from everywhere and the scenery was horrifying. The people who survived with all limbs intact like him gathered slowly. One of them suggest — They didn't know what happened, but they should first tend to the injured, then report their losses and situation to headquarters.

No one raise any objections. With the plan set, strange noises stimulated their war drums again. However, it wasn't loud noises that might be mistakened as thunder, but something everyone heard before.

"… These are… hooves…? And a great number…?"

The soldier looked to the west, hoping for allies who learned about this terrible situation to show up. However, their allies didn't appear on horseback, and they realized the sound didn't come from the west.

"Hmm…? But… That direction…"

Drawn by the noise, he cast his gaze to the north. He then realized that the barricade meant to be the final line of defence and blockade the forest path had been smashed, just like the three trenches that fell.

Some distance from the debris, he could see the forest path that was still covered in flames. It was the direction the sound of the hooves were coming from — when he noticed that, 'those things' emerged out of the fire wall and charged towards him.

"What —!"

Those things were cavalry. Both men and horse were covered in thick clothes soaked in water, a unit dressed exotically. They were using the thick clothes as a screen to protect themselves from the heat, and using their speed as a weapon to pierce through the fire wall. They even leapt over the burning logs in their way as if they were participating in a horse riding competition.

“E… Everyone… run—!”

This was his last words. The cavalry took off and discard the thick clothes that had served its purpose, maintaining speed as they drew their saber on horseback, charging into the grounds that was spewed with casualties.

This couldn’t be called a ‘battle’. For them, the battle ended when they traverse the fiery forest path with their horsemanship, the job that follows were just complementary. After a one sided massacre, none of the imperial soldiers present survived.

“No signs of the enemy, we seemed to have gotten them all, Major.”

Miara flicked the blood off her saber on the back of her horse. After hearing her report, Jean pull backed the hood that covered the top half of his face in response.

“Yah*, excluding the Shinaak collaborators, there are about 20 soldiers there. We destroyed their barricade with our bombardment too, we didn’t encounter any resistance worth mentioning.”

“Aside from four men whose feet got slightly burn, we have no other casualties. We can begin the next course of action immediately. What are your orders?”

When he heard this question, the white-haired officer look to the west without hesitation.

“Full speed westward. Break through any enemy we encounter, and head for the enemy base.”

“Will that be fine? We can stay here to extinguish the fire, then call for our allies.”

“Putting out the fire would take a lot of time, it would take time for the officers to understand the situation, and more time for the main force to move in through this forest path. No matter what, I don’t want to lose time on any of them — Most importantly, we have more than enough combat prowess to accomplish our goal. Don’t you agree?”

After saying that confidently, Jean looked at his men behind him. They were the 300 cavalry thoroughly trained in Kioka. As indicated by their ability in breaking through the flaming forest, every one of them was an elite. On top of that, they were outfitted with the state of the art Air Rifles, so their combat potential could rival one battalion.

“Exkyaazy*— Yes, let’s go. It’s time the imperial army suffer the retribution for blocking my path for so long!”

On the orders of the ‘the General of Insomniatic Brilliance’, they spur their horses forward, their eyes burning with fighting spirit.

When the sound of cannon fire from the west subsided, all the officers in the imperial base had been summoned by Ikuta’s orders. Aside from Torway who had gone to the west to intercept the western

detour route detachment, Yatori, Matthew, Haroma and Nanak all stood with a stiff face before the youth who was the overall commander.

"… The rear just sent us word. Enemy cavalry had broken through the eastern forest path in one go. They number 300, and is approaching this base fast."

Ikuta announced without a shred of warmth. Matthew who couldn't accept this yelled shrilly:

"How could that be!? What happened!? Both that thunder like bombardment and the enemy who broke through the firewall! How did they accomplish such a thing!?"

"… That should be blast cannons."

Yatori said out of nowhere. Ikuta nodded quietly when he heard that term.

"That's right, it's blast cannons. Compressing dynamic air created by fire sprites into the cannons, and using the explosive impact of the dynamic air to shoot out rounds, a new Kioka weapon… But according to the taboos of Aldera, this is something even less tolerable than balloons."

"For trenches to be completely ineffective… Are blast cannons such a powerful weapon?"

Haroma asked in a trembling voice, and Ikuta nodded without hesitation.

"Regrettably, that is correct. Just think of them as the Air Rifles of cannons. As a weapon, it is far beyond the capability of wind cannons of the past. Right now, all the forts and stronghold in the Empire would fall like paper mache if they are bombarded heavily by it."

"Using blast cannons to deal heavy damages to us from across the fire wall, and destroy the barricade. That was all just preparation, the final step was to charge through the burning forest path with cavalry and reach the other side."

"Can they achieve something so reckless by taking the field so suddenly…? One misstep and they will burn to death along the way."

"… True, since they are unlikely to do that right away theoretically, the enemy must have practise."

When they heard this answer, Matthew and Nanak's faces grew tense. Ikuta also slapped his forehead hard.

"… I have been had. The balloon flying in the same spot multiple times, and the cavalry that kept running around beneath it. So this the reason behind these two phenomenons?"

The youth who realized he noticed too late grit his teeth vexingly — the enemy was building a practice course. Using the balloon to watch the forest path from above, they note down the condition of the road in detail. They then chose the edge of the forest which was a blindspot for the Imperial soldiers on the mountain, and recreated an obstacle course based on the actual one for the cavalry to practice. To let the horses get used to it, they might have set fire to the obstacles in their replica…

The pre condition for this was that men and horses have to be exceptionally skilled.

“I don’t think the Holy Aldera cavalry could perform such movements that borders on being a circus act, and that would go against their religious teaching against using explosive cannons… This is definitely the detachment unit sent by the Kiokians.”

The General of Insomniatic Brilliance whom Ikuta had never met was eroding his mental toughness. Surrounded by his allies who were showing faces of despair, Ikuta looked to the sky like a fish that was suffocating.

— Alright, what should I do?

He took a deep breath. Using this action to calm his anxious heart, the youth organized his thoughts… First, he need to understand how much of a pinch his army was being pushed to.

300 enemy cavalry approaching from the east. There wasn’t any terrain that would hinder their movement, and would reach the base in four hours at the soonest. Their equipment was unknown, but since it was a Kioka unit, it was very possible that they were equipped with Air Rifles. That shot up their battle capability significantly.

In contrast, the imperial had 322 combatants, including the lightly wounded. The exact composition would be 61 luminous soldiers, 63 fire soldiers (38 of them doubling as cavalry), 140 wind gunners, 40 medical corps, 54 Shinaaks. However, they would need at least 160 men to carry out the mobile defense plan, and the 40 men deployed to the east would not be able to get here before the battle starts. From the above, their number of combatants would be reduced to 122 men.

300 elite cavalry armed with Air Rifles, against a mixed unit of 122 people exhausted from a long campaign… He could see the result, but he still need to compare their combat prowess — Taking all factors that could affect the battle, along with external conditions, their strength was five to one.

He reached a conclusion. The enemy 5 times as powerful would appear 4 hours later.

“… I see, I see. Ah~ by the way, what caused us to be in such a pinch?”

The commander tried to grasp the reason for the failure — His rationale side answered immediately, leaving Ikuta no room to refute.

“Ohh I understand — To sum it up, I have the obligation to think of a way to settle this.”

The youth gave a long sighed, and after spitting out all the air in his lungs, he made up his mind.

“… Phew! Yes, I understand the situation — So Yatori, let’s go have some fun.”

That’s the first thing he said, and the fiery haired girl understood his intention quickly and nodded. Her unhesitatant reaction made Ikuta smile wryly, and then shift his gaze to the next person.

“Lieutenant Matthew, starting right now, I will be handing the command of this base to you.”

“Huh?”

“Yatori and I will lead the troops to engage the enemy cavalry. You need to stay here and help me direct the defensive battle, please help me.”

Before the stun Matthew could speak, Ikuta looked to Haroma besides him.

“Lieutenant Haroma, you and Lieutenant Matthew are now the last officers in this place. I’m sorry, but I need you to hand your field hospital management duties to your deputy, and lead troops in action too.”

“Ah… Yes… Not, Ikuta-san…!”

Ikuta didn’t plan to and didn’t have time for the other party to protest. He shouted in a volume that can be heard throughout the entire base:

“Third Training Luminous Platoon, reserves unit, First Training Light Cavalry, and I need 23 people from the Shinaaks! Fall in at the east side of the base!”

When they heard this order, the soldiers who were holding their breath as they watched the officers hold their meeting started moving. Ikuta look at the formation being mustered from the corner of his eye, and continued speaking to his comrade that was still here:

“I will take 122 soldiers with me, so the base will have 160 combatants and 500 odd non combatants. There would be even less people, but the repairs of the fire wall for the two forest path to the east would be handled by us, so it won’t be an issue. You all just need to handle the work here and to the west.”

“E… Even if you ask me so suddenly… No, the problem isn’t with repairs! You say you will use 122 men, a mixed unit without any wind gunners to engage enemy cavalry? That is suicide! If you are going to do that, then I might as well —”

Lead my troops to engage them. Matthew wanted to say that, but the words got stuck in his throat… His survival instinct was screaming at him: Even if Matthew commit all the wind gunners available, he won’t be able to fight this enemy.

“It’s fine, Matthew. If we are going to engage air rifles with air shooters, we will lose once it turns into a shoot out. That’s why we would be at a disadvantage even if we bring wind gunners with us.”

“Like I said, this is no different from suicide! Do you have a concrete plan to overturn this unfavourable situation!?”

“I think there should be, I will think about it later.”

Matthew’s jaws almost dropped. After forcing the issue so far, Ikuta shift his eyes to the last person that needed to stay here. But the other party already came to him, and grabbed Ikuta’s shirt at the waist.

"I don't want to stay behind, Ikuta. Take me with you."

"… I am happy that you feel that way, But Nana, it would be better if you stay here and direct the repairs of the fire wall…"

"What nonsense are you saying!? No matter how many people survive, if you die, everything will be over! If you die, who will uphold the promise for the Empire to find a place for the Shinaaks to settle!?"

Her argument hit Ikuta right where it hurts. Since he was the only one who could mediate the negotiation, Ikuta's life was equivalent to the tribe's life, and he must not be despatched on such a risky mission so easily.

Also, this wasn't the only reason why Nanak insisted. She held the hands of the youth, and glared at the only person who wants to accompany the youth willingly and said:

"Don't just rely on that red one… Ikuta, I will protect you!"

Her determination was absolutely immovable. After learning this, Ikuta could only nod with a bitter expression.

"… I understand, you can come with me. But you must absolutely follow my orders, can you do that?"

The request for her absolute obedience probably reminded her of something. Nanak's face turned a little red. Ikuta turned his eyes away from her, and walked towards the soldiers gathering to the east of the base. Yatori and Nanak followed behind him too.

"W… Wait… You guys…!"

Matthew felt fearful as they went further away and gave chase. Ikuta kept his back to him and stopped Matthew with a raised hand.

"The place you are responsible for is here, Matthew. Defend this place for two more days then retreat immediately, and head for the rear base that have finished their preparation for war. We will go by another route, and meet you at the mountains three days later."

"I can't do any of that! You think we can hold this place for two more days with me in charge!?"

"Oh, to be frank, it's a little risky."

The merciless answer pierced Matthew. Before he could recover from the shock, Ikuta continued:

"The best result would be defending until the very end… But no matter what the situation, I won't give the order to 'hold til your last'. To hold the place even if it would take your lives, and to do so until you die — I will not ask my subordinates to do something I couldn't do myself, something so unscientific. If you feel that you have reached the limit, don't hesitate to retreat. If you don't even have time to retreat, just raise the white flag and surrender."

“Ugh… Even if you say that, if we don’t hold this place, in the end…”

“This is a good chance, so I will tell you the order of things clearly. The best outcome is defending this place to the end. Second best would be you all making it out safe but we lose this place. The other two results are equally bad. You understand? If you two aren’t safe, it would be equally bad no matter if you hold this place or not.”

And so… Ikuta continued speaking in a strong tone, giving the best encouragement he could to his friend.

“I will only give one order — survive, Matthew. We will meet again in 3 days.”

Ikuta bid farewell with this words and walked forth. When he saw the back that seemed to be rejecting being sent off, Matthew who didn’t want to appear even more disgraceful grit his teeth and turned.

“… Damn it! I get it, I just need to do it right! I will just do it!”

“Huh! Please wait, Matthew-san! I want to go too…!”

Haroma met up with Matthew who ran ahead. The reality they would have to face with their backs straight was right in front of them.

Chapter 4: Confrontation

Shortly before sunset, Ikuta and company headed east to intercept the enemy units.The youth ran along the road with ragged breath in the dark, his brain turning even faster than the pace of his feet..

There was no need to bring up the differences in their combat prowess anymore — Ikuta was lucky to have the one and only advantage, which was the night. If they could fight in an environment even darker than dusk, they would be able to use the light beams from the luminous troops offensively. He formulated his plan around this factor.

“According to this pace, we will run into the enemy in 2 hours. You should be able to come up with a plan. Right Lieutenant?”

Sergeant Major Suya who was running alongside him felt anxious and asked because her commanding officer hadn’t said a word since they set off. Ikuta didn’t have any concrete plan yet, but he still showed a bold smile.

“… The enemy won one round with that blast cannon incident. Probably because of that, my urge to not lose had been stirred. Not hitting back after being hit feels unpleasant, don’t you agree?”

He didn’t answer directly, but after confirming the strength in the youth’s eyes, Suya looked to the front again… She seemed to understand that no matter what happens she would not be forced to die in the course of her duty because of the commander’s reckless orders.

“It might be meaningless to say this to you since you have memorized the map, Lieutenant, but I should still report this. We will be reaching a wider road leading straight into the forest. The only place that could barely serve as a venue to engage them would be that spot where the cliff walls jut out. It’s possible for the troops to hide in ambush on the side of the road, but…”

“With our numbers less than half that of the enemy, and without any wind gunners, it would be meaningless to do so. Even if we struck the enemy successfully, they will just brush us off and continue advancing.”

Ikuta clicked his tongue. An orthodox battle plan wouldn’t be able to stop the advance of the enemy. Even if he let the soldiers blockade the road in ambush, they would just be taking on a cavalry charge that outnumber them two to one. Even though the light beams might stun them momentarily, the enemy were elites that spurred their horses through the flames. They would definitely recover and counter attack in no time.

Aside from that, if the enemy predict the place to where they would be intercepted, they would very likely engage from afar by shooting on horsebacks. That would be the worst scenario. Ikuta’s troop would be attacked at a range where their light beams and crossbow were ineffective, and would be charged by cavalry after their formation falters. What awaited them would be the fate of being wiped

out.

“That’s right, the problems are horses and Air Rifles… If I don’t think of a way to deal with these two overwhelming offences, we won’t be able to stand on even ground with the enemy in the first place.”

What should he do to achieve this? As Ikuta brain stormed to seek the means to handle this, the sound of horse hooves came from his front. His heart raced, but that wasn’t the enemy, but Yatori’s cavalry who made use of their speed to scout ahead.

“I checked the situation up front. There are allied troops tasked with maintaining the fire wall, but most of them are Shinnacks noncombatants. There is no time for them to converge with our forces, so I send them to seek refuge in the hills.”

“That’s fine. By the way, Yatori, what do you think after actually seeing the terrain? Is there any way for us to intercept them?”

“… Unlikely. I saw stretches of road that were narrow, but not enough to give us the advantage. I thought about building a new fire wall, but…”

Yatori didn’t explain further — That’s right, there was no point in doing so. The blockaded enemy would probably give up attacking the headquarters to the west, but they would wait for the fire in the eastern path to subside instead, and summon the main forces of the Holy Aldera Army; The enemy would just need to ignore the headquarters here and advance into the mountains directly.

In other words, it was useless to just block the route of the enemy. They had to defeat their adversaries, rush to the eastern forest path where the fire would be going out, and rebuild the fire wall to fend off the invasion of the Holy Aldera Army.

“… I need some ideas. Sorry Yatori, anything is fine, tell me about the terrain ahead. I want to work my brain a little.”

Ikuta ran besides the cavalry who had turned around and requested. After thinking for a moment, Yatori said:

“… There is a work area set up to maintain the fire wall, accessible by two narrow passages from here, and three narrow paths from the eastern forest. Because I ordered our allies there to run, a large number of lumber and straws are scattered there. There isn’t time to build a barricade, but if we make good use of these things, we might be able to create road conditions that the cavalry would detest.”

Ikuta felt that this was a great starting point. Making use of the resources on site— He allowed his imagination to run, thinking about a way out of this. Can his forces use these things to overcome the despairing difference in power due to the horses and Air Rifles—

His mind that was repeating the process of hypothesizing, inspecting and discarding suddenly stopped.

“ — I see… This might work… right…? Stop the enemy from backing away and escaping, and prepare the flags in advance… It’s true, we can at least have equal standings…”

Seeing Ikuta looked as if he thought of something, the soldiers in the vicinity all cast hopeful gazes on him. However, this made him even more hesitant about articulating his thoughts. If they asked him if the content could meet their expectations, it would be very hard to determine.

“… I did thought of a way, but… it isn’t really a good plan. It can be classified as foolish, or even insane. The type I would never use if not for our present circumstances…”

Ikuta muttered with a bitter expression…But in a corner of his heart, he knew very well their predicament couldn’t be resolved with just a good plan. It would require an idea verging on the edge of madness to open a way forward.

“… Let’s hurry to the narrow path, we can only execute it there.”

After saying that, Ikuta forced his legs that were like iron from fatigue to speed up. The troops followed hurriedly, and all their hopes and unease laid squarely on the back of the young commander.

“… No matter what happens, I will forever remember this shame for thinking up and executing this plan.”

The words he said to himself didn’t reach the ears of his subordinates.

Illuminated by the blessings of the faint orange light, the cavalry led by Jean continued its quick advance at dusk.

They only encountered one battle along the way, and it would seem too much to call that one-sided massacre a battle anyway. All the enemy along their route of travel had fled, and in the empty base with abandoned timber and straw, there wasn’t anything stopping them.

“If there is any resistance, it should be up ahead. Jean, be on your guard.”

“It’s the narrow path we saw from the balloon right. What preparations will the enemy make for us?”

A smile appeared on the lips of the white-haired officer, his sense of ease stemmed from his unshakable confidence.

“…Mum? That is…”

When the group reached the problematic area, the troops at the front noticed the drastic change. At the same time, the entire unit slowed down. Jean immediately took out his telescope and looked.

About 200m ahead of them, the terrain jutting out to the left of the cliff face was visible. The cliff and the forest formed a narrow path, which was blockaded by sandbags to halt Jean’s advance. On the other side was a rank of Imperial soldiers with bowguns.

The stretch of road before the narrow place was used as the work area to maintain the line of fire. Similar to the bases they passed by, straws and timber were scattered all over. As Jean felt the messy scene had a strange sense of order about it, he smelled something pungent.

“Jean, it smell like oil.”

“I noticed too, Ham, what’s going on?”

He slowed the advance to a trot, and started analyzing the information he obtained from his senses.

“There are straws and wood on our route of advance, soldiers with bowguns ahead of us and smell of oil in the air… Oh, I see, I get it. These are the foreshadowing of a fire attack. Drenching the straws and wood with oil, and when we charged and slip on the oil, they will shoot fire arrows quickly. That’s how they plan to finish us off.”

Jean came to a conclusion in less than five seconds, and shrugged immediately.

“Mum… It isn’t bad for an plan thought out on a whim. But they are too naive if they think we will overlook the smell. Now that we are aware of their intentions, we won’t let them have their way by charging.”

After refuting this course of action, the white-haired officer announced to his subordinates:

“Prepare to fire, ready your Air Rifles.”

The soldiers drew out the rifle hanging on the side of the horse with the same motion, and fixed their partner from their pouch onto it. Except for Jean and Miara who didn’t have Air Rifles, everyone got in position to fire.

“Move at walking place to 150m from the target. Cavalry, advance.”

The cavalry with Air Rifles raised formed a wall as they advanced quietly. As they were firing from the unstable base of the horse, even though they were using Air Rifles, their fire was only accurate up to 150m. But that was enough. If they attacked from such a distance, it would be useless for the enemy to attack with fire or bowguns.

“— Form ranks and prepare to fire.”

The four columns of cavalry broke into 8, then 16 columns. Together with the second rank that shifted slightly to the left, a total of 32 guns aimed at the Imperial forces behind the sandbags.

“… Alright, open— No, wait!”

Jean was about to order his men to fire, but restrained them for unknown reasons instead. Watched by their confused gaze, Jean started analyzing the reason he halted them… It was a warning from his instinct, and the sense that something was amiss, which was crawling up his back.

“… The smell of the oil is turning faint…?”

His keen perception to realize this was worth mentioning— If he had another 3 seconds, he would be turn this discovery into action, and warn his men after detecting the trap.

This mere three seconds decided heaven or hell. The cavalry placed their focus in front of them, but fate struck from their blind spot, which was the feet of their horses. Pushing aside the straws covering their presence, they cried for the first time after being birthed.

Light shone out from all over the ranks of the Kioka cavalry.

The 70 odd tightly focused thin beams of light didn’t illuminate the darkness, and pierced into the eyes of the horses like white spears instead.

“””””””””””””””“Neigh— !”””””””””””””””””

Horses couldn’t speak but their neighs were undoubtedly screams. In this dark environment when their pupils were enlarged, the bright light filled the eyes of the horses with white. The unexpected blow threw even the hardened warhorses of the Kiokian army into panic.

“What— ! Hey! Down girl! Ugh— !”

“It’s… It’s the enemy! Ambushing from below— Wahhhh!”

The Kiokians tried to calm the horses, but the threat lying in wait beneath wouldn’t let them. The ambushing soldiers struck the belly of the panicking horses with the bayonets attached to their bowguns. After dealing with one, they will target another horse in the vicinity.

“Ha… Haha… Hahahaha…!”

Ikuta executed these movements under tremendous fear and pressure as he laughed uncontrollably at the same time. He slipped between the horses, and even got the hair on the back of his head sliced off by a sabre. He kept aiming for the round beady eyes of the horses and shining beams into them. This wasn’t an action that could be done in a sane state of mind.

“Hahaha! Not enough! Need to be more chaotic!”

Ikuta stabbed all the horses in his sights with his bayonet, be it the one near him or those that lost control and threw off their riders. Two women brandishing different weapons chased hard after him.

“Ikuta, don’t run too far in front…! I won’t be able to protect you!”

“He probably didn’t hear that…!”

One of them held gauches in both hands, the other gripped a bowgun fixed with a bayonet. Nanak and Suya worked actively in the middle of the enemy formation. Both of them understood how Ikuta felt as he scrambled around with his head down, as the most dangerous thing one could do right now was

stand in place.

In order to live longer, the only way was to hide and move amongst the panicked crowd, avoiding being targeted by multiple enemies. The path to survival only existed in the turbulence of chaos. However, the chances of getting one's skull crush by a kick of a horse was equally high.

That was the reason why Ikuta called this tactic insane. This plan wouldn't achieve victory or gain any advantage, but a chaos that would be uncontrollable once initiated.

"Move move move! Hey! You over there! You will die if you stop!"

Ikuta noticed a comrade who was standing still in a daze out of fear, and kicked his back. The next instant, a sabre slashed through the space where the head of the soldier was. The youth retaliated by shining a beam at the horse of the rider. Another crazy horse was created, which not only shook off its rider, and even ran off in a completely different direction.

"You get a hold of yourself!"

The rider who fell off his horse got up and swung his sabre at Ikuta. At this moment, nanak got between the two of them her swords spinning like a windmill. The rider's face was splitted like a watermelon and collapse, and Suya rushed to her commander's side.

"How… how many more seconds?"

"I didn't count from the very beginning! If you get distracted by the time remaining, you will die…!"

The group of three spoke as they ran— They couldn't see the entire field because the body of the horses were blocking their view, but from the cries of the horses and soldiers, the chaos were spreading successfully. If that was true, this battle which was like a race through hell while being chased by demons wouldn't last long.

"The enemy fell for the trap! We just need to trust Yatori!"

A charging horse came from the side, which prompted Ikuta and the others to dodge and roll away from the danger. In the increasingly chaotic battlefield, everyone including them had the same thoughts — The time where one had to give it their all in order to survive from moment to moment felt really long…

"Damn it! What's going on!"

There were also riders at the edge of the formation that wasn't affected by the chaos. They pulled some distance away and linked up with their comrades that was fine, and observed the situation with bated breath. Between the enemy and allies were crazy horses that had degraded into feral beasts, and they couldn't find any way to restore order.

"A… Anyway, gather all the scattered men and reorganize the unit! Hey! Gather here!"

One rider yelled to his scattered allies. Despite the failing command structure, they could still act independently, which was proof of them being excellent soldiers. His comrades gathered one by one in response to his call.

“Alright, this will work! The guys at the edge, get away from the main forces and gather here instead!”

If they could separate the enemy from themselves, they could launch a counteroffensive. The soldiers who came to such a conclusion called out to their comrades. At this moment, the sound of a group of cavalry came from behind them.

“Ohh, that’s a large number! Great, our numbers will increase in one shot—”

Their joyous tone turned into confusion midway. Despite coming so near, the new riders that came from behind had no intention of slowing down, and was accelerating instead.

“… No… No, that’s the enemy! Prepare to engage, draw your sabres— ”

“Hyaaaaa!”

Before they were ready to engage the enemy, the cavalry led by the flame haired women attacked pre emptively. The charging cavalry crashed into the riders that were stationary and the result was as expected. The Kioka riders were dispersed by Yatori’s charge, and was cut down mercilessly while they were still panicking.

“We succeeded in stopping them from mustering here! Alright, on to the next target!”

Yatori’s group wasn’t adamant on wiping out the enemy. After they scattered the group that was regrouping, they started galloping away to search for their next objective.

Attacking the enemy cavalry that strayed from the chaos of the main forces— Their mission was to keep the battlefield muddled for as long as possible. Not giving the enemy the chance to calm down, as chaos was a necessary foundation to proceed to the next step.

“The battle had gone on for quite some time, it should be fine to brandish the flag now…!”

After Yatori finished muttering, she pulled out a flag from the side of the galloping horse. With one hand on the reins, she placed the flag pole onto a holder secured to behind the saddle.

The luminous sprite that was tied to the flagpole ahead of time lit up the fluttering flag.

Jean who was with a group that was less affected fell into silence. This was the first time Miara saw him hesitate in making a decision.

“I was had… No, was it simply an error in my judgement…”

The white-haired officer mumbled to himself as he clenched his fists tightly. Instead of being angry

about the enemy's brilliant tactics, he was more frustrated by his own foolishness.

"…Vankzyaal…Ugh! How unsightly, Jean Arkinex! Thinking one-sidedly that it will be a fire attack because of the smell of oil, and overlooked the ambush…!"

The pungent oil odour was just a feint to get Jean thinking about a fire attack. The ambushing troops that appeared in their midst the moment the cavalry passed by was the true attack… Jean realized that this illogical and barbaric idea was an inevitable tactic derived from rational deductions.

Compared to the enemy, Jean's cavalry had three advantages from the beginning. First was their superior numbers, second was the offensive prowess of cavalry, and third was the range of the Air Rifles. Out of these three, there was one way to wipe away point number two and three, which was to shorten the distance.



The offensive prowess of the cavalry could only be unleashed fully by charging from a distance, the advantage of the Air Rifle was its ability to attack one-sidedly from range. The common point between these two was that they were meaningless to enemy who were close to them from the start.

Cavalry before a charge was akin to a slow infantry, and the Air Rifles would be useless in melee combat. The enemy was aware of these.

“On top of that, they are aiming for the eyes of the horses with focus beams of light… Even if they are trained, horses are still timid creatures, and will fall into panic if one of their eyes couldn’t see suddenly. In the chaos, more than half the soldiers lost their ability to fight… In other words, the number of troops that couldn’t take part in battle, which lessened the difference in combat prowess.”

“J… Jean…”

“Nyatt*…Nyatt*! This isn’t a tactic which relies on pure luck, but refined use of techniques— But that is why I can’t forgive the one who came up with this plan… Isn’t this strange!? The conclusion of such rational thoughts is actually such chaos…!”

Jean spoke as if he was spewing lava. In the sights before him was an unsightly mess of a battle. A primitive fight where commands and tactics had no value was ongoing, with no telling when it would end. There would be no victors or losers at its conclusion, only piles of corpses.

“… This is the limit, I can’t stand to watch anymore…! Let’s go Miara, break through the enemy from the front!”

“Jean, please wait! Even if we want to act, we couldn’t even mobilize twenty riders! Even if we break through, we might get picked off one by one because of our small numbers…!”

Because of the painful voice of Miara restraining him, Jean barely managed to regain his composure… In such a dire situation, the commander couldn’t take on such risk brashly. Because if he was to die, the entire unit would be done for.

Despite that, he still needed to deal with the situation before him. Jean scanned his surroundings to search for the means to resolve the issue. At this moment, he noticed a cavalry unit was running around with a flag lit by a light.

“That… isn’t our allies. Is it an enemy unit? The colour of the flag held by the leading soldier is…”

“… Red and white horizontal stripes. This is the flag that means ‘willing to negotiate’, Jean.”

The muscles on the white-haired general’s face twitched because of shock, shame and rage over this immoral situation.

“Willing to accept…? ‘Proposing a negotiation’ would be vertical stripes, and the truth is, they just needed to shout that they want to negotiate. The enemy isn’t doing that, but kept waving that flag, which means…”

“… They are waiting for us to show a weakness.”

Miara revealed the answer. The impact and humiliation made Jean grab his chest and trembled.

— Unbearable, you shouldn’t be able to bear with this.

Ikuta sought to survive in the chaotic battle alongside Nanak and Suya, as he deduced the thinking of the enemy general.

— After all our battles so far, I completely understand that the one called ‘Brilliant Insomniac’ is a great officer indeed. You won’t be led astray by your emotions, and always seek the best method through rational logic. An impressive and strong foe.

He ducked from a sabre slashing down at his head, the hooves of horses landing heavily beside his face.

— However, it is easy to understand the thinking of such a man. Or rather, we aren’t too different. Since we fought so many times, it was easy to see his values in the utilization of his troops. In a word, you are a ‘play director’ type of soldier. The greedy type who want the battle to be under your sole control if the situation permits. Such people have a tendency of being overly concerned with the ‘cast’ in the play. For example, in this situation, the subordinates under you falls under this position.

Nanak raised her Gauche and slashed fiercely at the horse that wanted to trample Ikuta who was on the ground. The foreleg of the war horse received a bone deep cut, and neighed in pain.

— What this type of opponent hate the most is the battlefield losing its order. And the cast they spent so much time nurturing losing their lives in the chaos, while the director can only watch helplessly. You can’t bear with such fruitless irrationality, and can’t leave it be.

A rider targeted Suya who had stopped due to fatigue, approaching her gradually from behind. Ikuta unleashed a beam to disorientate their sights, and use the chance to pull his deputy into hsi arms.

— I won’t ‘propose a negotiation’. Under the current circumstance, proposing a negotiation is as good as surrendering. However, ‘accepting a negotiation’ would be forcing the enemy to a dead end. Because that flag sends a forceful message that ‘we are planning to fight to the last man, but if you give in first, we will be willing to consider your proposal’.

Ikuta couldn’t pull out the bayonet he stabbed into the horse belly, and abandoned it instead, only retrieving Kush and his bowgun. At this moment, enemy cavalry appeared from three directions, charging him after he had lost his weapon.

— What’s wrong? Hurry up and give in! Move on to the next stage! Hating this type of battle is a common consensus for both of us!

Realizing he had nowhere to run, Ikuta rejected Nanak and Suya who wanted to help him with a gesture. In the face of the threat coming from before him and his flanks, the youth had no way of resisting, but still glared back with defiant eyes.

“’’’’’’’’“Stop the battle—!’’’’’’’’’’’

Ikuta accepted this at the same time— An order that was relayed from the front of the enemy’s

formation like some messed up game of telephone; in front of him was the figure of excellent riders who managed to stop themselves from attacking. A pitiful smile could be seen on their face.

Seeing the enemy raised a flag with red and white straight lines that meant ‘proposing a negotiation’, Yatori’s cavalry unit also stopped advancing. The order to stop the battle spread across the battlefield slowly, and the sound of fighting faded with each passing second.

Although red and white flags were being hoisted everywhere, the commanders had to perform the actual negotiations. Yatori contemplated for a moment, then headed for the place where there were the most soldiers. Her cavalry was about the same number as the enemy, so there was no need for unnecessary worries.

“I am First Lieutenant Yatorishino Igsem of the Imperial Army. May I meet with your commanding officer?”

She began by introducing herself, so the riders at the front rank made a path, and two figures appearing to be officers came out. One was a black haired woman wearing glasses, the other was a white haired youth. His features could be seen easily, and Yatori could tell who he was without needing him to introduce himself.

“I am Major Jean Arkinex, currently serving as a guest officer with the Ra-Saia-Alderamin army. This is my deputy, First Lieutenant Miara Gin.”

“I am honoured by your detailed introductions. It is my pleasure to meet the famous ‘Insomniac Brilliant General’ on the battlefield.”

“Hah*, the pleasure is all mine. It is a terrible misfortune for me to cross path with a ‘blade of Igsem’ though.”

They conversed superficially. Even though he maintained a calm demeanour in his speech, it was clear that Jean was wavering under negative emotions. After they had introduced themselves, Jean immediately got into the heart of the matter.

“Let’s start the negotiations then. As the proposer, I would like to state my demands, is that fine?”

“Of course, but please wait a moment.”

“…Mum*? We are already speaking face to face, what are we waiting for?”

“For the one who will be negotiating of course. Our commanding officer will be parlaying with you, Major Arkinex.”

Yatori who was surveying the surrounding suddenly fixated on one direction, Jean and Miara followed her gaze. In the path opened by the confused Kioka cavalry was a black haired and black eyed youth. He was covered in blood and mud, with his partner luminous sprite in hand, and had two women soldier with different skin tones in tow.

“I apologize for being late, I am First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork of the Imperial Army, the commanding officer of this unit.”

When Jean heard these words, he felt surprised about two things. First, the member of the Igsem family in front of him wasn’t the commander; Second, the commander himself actually took part in the chaotic battle earlier.

“Before we start, I have a request. I want you to instruct your troops to ‘stay where they are and not to move’.”

“What are you talking about…?”

“It would be troubling if either parties make any strange moves during our talks. It should be the same for you, so I will issue the same order to my subordinates.”

As Jean wanted to restore order to his unit as soon as possible, he was unhappy about this proposal. However, restoring their formation would be disadvantageous to the enemy, so this was an obvious request.

“… What about rendering aid to the wounded?”

“That is acceptable, but the helper need to disarm and dismount.”

Ikuta answered immediately. Jean considered for a few seconds, and decided to accept.

“Yah*, I will give my consent— All units, listen! Unless I am attacked, all of you are to stay in place before receiving orders! Only assistance to casualties are allowed, but you have to disarm and dismount before doing so!”

“All personnel under my command listen, except those helping our allies, all of you are to stay in position before further orders.”

Unlike Jean’s youthful and loud voice, Ikuta whose voice had gone hoarse said in softly. The troops obeyed the orders and focused on helping the wounded, and the stage for the negotiations was finally set.

“Then let’s begin the talk. First, the proposing side will state their demand.”

“Understood. As for the demand— I want you to surrender. Even if we continue the fight, you have no chance of winning, and our side do not wish for further sacrifices. I can guarantee that you would be treated adequately as prisoners if you surrender. That is our demand.”

“I understand your request, and rejected it completely.”

Jean tried asking for the sky first, but Ikuta didn’t show any weakness and rejected without hesitation. The temperature in the air between them dropped immediately.

“I feel that is a foolish decision, First Lieutenant Solork. I find it hard to agree with your actions that would let your troops die futilely.”

“Don’t need to worry, I don’t plan to let anyone else lose their live.”

“If that’s how you really think, then you have only one choice, which is surrender. My vision might be hindered by obstacles, but I can tell from the battle that your forces is less than half of mine. Your creative ambushing tactics that rendered cavalry and Air Rifle ineffective is commendable, but this is the end. Once it becomes a grind of numbers against numbers, my forces will emerge victorious. You only have the choice of being wiped out or surrendering.”

“If that is how you really feel, then this negotiation is just a waste of time. How about we restart the battle right now?”

Ikuta rebuked with a cold tone, which made Jean’s facial muscles twitched. The youth grabbed onto the white-haired officers reluctance to continue the battle and showed a forceful attitude mercilessly.

“We will state our demands too. I want you all to stop the battle here, and retreat back to the other side of the Gagarukasakan forest. We are planning to retreat from here two days later anyway, so you will just lose two short days even if you retreat now.”

“… You have seen through me, so I will be honest that I don’t want to continue fighting for even one second more. But even so, we won’t retreat so easily. After all, I am here as an Exchange Officer to achieve victory for the Holy Aldera Army.”

“You might not be willing to reach a compromise, but both sides have a blade at each others throat. The one to back down will lose badly, and if both side stand their grounds, no matter if we are willing or not, we will end up cutting each other down.”

“Let me repeat myself, if that happens, we will be the ones who lives. A grinding battle might be the worse scenario for us, but if that is the only choice, I have the resolve to go through with it… But is that necessary? I think that your determination to face death isn’t as steely as you say.”

Jean countered and peeked at his adversary’s reaction. Ikuta wore a sarcastic smile on his face.

“There is one thing you got right and one mistake in your words.”

“What…?”

“First, the right answer. It is true that I am not determined to fight to the death. As for your mistake— If we cut each other down, your side won’t be the ones that will live in the end.”

“Dyculpus*! I can’t stand this, know your limits in making a brave front. Didn’t you notice how many times we have flown the balloon? I already confirmed the full extent of your forces, and had subtracted the necessary personnel to maintain the fire line of defence. I basically know how many troops you have with you right here.”

"Seems like we have a gap in our perspectives. I did say you won't be the ones that will live in the end, but I didn't say our side will survive right?"

"…Mum*? What are you trying to say…?"

"This is a simple matter of phrasing. You said that 'we will be the ones that will live', but 'we' includes 'I' as well— that means it will only hold true if 'you' are included right?"

The instant Ikuta finished this with an arrogant smile, the luminous sprite that was in lantern light mode suddenly shot out a glaring high beam from its light cavity, directing it to Jean who was mounted on his horse. This sudden action surprised Jean's subordinates.

"Wait, what is the meaning of this—

"Don't move, your commander will die."

When she heard Ikuta, Miara who was about to protest angrily froze. However, Jean wasn't intimidated at all.

"…Hah*, this is troubling. Do I look so frail that I will die from a light beam?"

"That doesn't seem to be the case. Anyway, look at the light shining on your chest… Don't that circle look like a bullseye? Or rather, it is a bullseye."

These words froze Jean's smile for the first time. The next second, he scanned the surrounding frantically, while the corner of Ikuta's lips rose.

"It's impossible to see him from this position. It's nothing to be surprised about, you realize by now that the Air Rifles isn't available exclusively to you right?"

Ikuta made a show of shrugging. The 'Brilliant Insomniac' was showing his fear overtly.

A wind soldier with Air Rifle in hand, hiding in the dark as he aimed at the enemy commander. Did such a man exist— No matter how he thought about it, Jean couldn't discern the truth. Even though he could postulate the rough number of enemy units, he couldn't tell if there were soldiers with Air Rifles present. There just needed to be one such person to make this threat feasible.

— I will be borrowing your Phantom, Torway.

The youth muttered in his heart. He described in the past about the terror of something that might be there. This method made use of the instinct of human which fears the unknown.

"Don't think about dismounting, such actions would be interpreted as a signal, it applies to anyone who wanted to block the bullet paths. I already predicted such a possibility, and deployed my men to snipe from an elevated position. Even if someone wanted to take the bullet for you, it would probably fail."

“Attacks are not allowed during negotiations! Are you trying to violate the war treaty!?”

“It’s true that launching attacks during negotiations would be a violation, but the moment you dismount or orders your subordinate to act, the negotiations would be over. As negotiation can only happen if both parties agrees to it, we both have the freedom to decide when negotiations ends. And of course, attacks wouldn’t be allowed when your army raise the negotiation flag— But as you can see, this is the only flag our party has. It won’t take much effort to raise or lower it. Depending on your actions, we are ready to lower it at any moment.”

Ikuta threw a sideway glance at Yatori who had removed the ‘accept negotiations’ flag from its holster and was holding it with both hands, and spoke in a devious tone. His attitude might seem natural, this still concern the lives of his subordinates and him, so this was actually a bluff that took all his efforts. The back of his uniform was already wet from his sweat.

“…Nyatt*! This is not a negotiation, but just an open threat! This might not be against the rules, considering the spirit of the treaty, but it will definitely not be accepted!

“Oh? What an interesting opinion. Then let me ask you, what is the difference in a battlefield negotiation and threats? Both of them hint subtly at the threat of their forces in an attempt to grab the upper hand. So you are just calling a disadvantage negotiation as a threat.”

“If the other party isn’t willing to accept the terms, then we will meet again in battle, that’s the consensus for both sides. The only thing that is different is that I deployed my men in a good position to snipe you, but you neglected to prepare for such a situation. Isn’t that the only difference?”

His protest was refuted calmly. Facing such humiliation for the first time in his life, the white-haired officer grabbed his hair agitatedly.

“… You mean the ambush and the set up for this negotiation was all planned to threaten me…?”

“That isn’t important at all, you just need to understand your current situation. If you won’t back down no matter what, I will judge that the negotiation has failed, and will take your life via sniping immediately. Using the chance when the command structure falls into chaos, we will scatter and run away. This might not be a smart move, but it is still a legit move. I am prepared to make this move— What about you?”

Jean analyzed Ikuta’s question hurriedly— He knew that the other party was bluffing. If he really had soldiers with Air Rifles, he would have brought some of them with him to make the claim more believable. They weren’t here because this was all just an illusion from the very start.

Based on such circumstantial evidence, Jean was certain that 90% of Ikuta’s words were bluffs— However, 90% wasn’t enough, the 10% uncertainty still entangled him.

Some people might think ignoring this 10% was equivalent to bravery? But Jean thought different. One should minimize the number of times you cast your dice on the battlefield— That was his philosophy. Furthermore, he didn’t want to ever throw deadly dices that would kill him if the 10%

came true.

"… If I declare here that I am resolved to die for the cause?"

It took all Jean had to show a dignified front. This was his last bluff. Ikuta shook his head quietly.

"That's fine, if this is your conclusion, but that's not your style at all. For you, not letting your subordinates or yourself die needlessly would be the correct answer right? Forget it, humans are creature that can even betray themselves, it is your choice to live with this regret— However, if you die, you won't be able to regret it."

"… This is our first meeting, and you are talking about my personality in such sure terms…"

"First time we met? Surely you jest. In the six days since the line of fire defense started, I feel that we have been playing chess with just a table between us all this while. The only thing I couldn't see was your pretty face."

No matter how much the other party intimidated him, Ikuta didn't budge from his strong attitude. Threatening with an attack which was nothing more than a paper tiger, he boasted that he could land a decapitating blow. He openly claim his illusion to be an advantage.

However, Jean was just too smart and couldn't call this bluff— And because of his brilliance, he had to choose the right conclusion.

"… I accept your demands, let us discuss the steps for the withdrawal of my forces."

The moment the white-haired utter this statement, his subordinates including Miara wondered if there were something wrong with their ears. Their wavering even spreaded to the other cavalry who noticed this change in atmosphere. The black-haired youth nodded seriously.

"— There is no shame in this, you made the decision you had to make, Major Jean Arkinex."

Their retreated started by partial disarmament. The Kiokian army was asked to discard the bullets in their Air Rifles, and 80% of their horses were tied to the trees nearby. Their combat capabilities had been reduced so that they could resist if assaulted by the Imperials, but couldn't do anything more than that.

"As requested, we won't seize or harm these horses. We will leave them alone after providing water and feed. When you break through the forest two days later, you can retrieve them as you wish. Don't worry, we will honour this agreement. Or rather, this is the terms in exchange for your retreat, and it will be violation of wartime treaty if we don't keep to the terms."

After Ikuta made this promise, the Kiokan riders who were forced to part with their beloved horses appeared more relieved. After the horses were tied down and the Air Rifle munitions were tossed into the forest, the difference in combat capability narrowed and Ikuta finally turned off the search light he trained on Jean.

"Alright, since we deprived you of your horses, you couldn't go back via the same way. Anyway, just take your wounded with you and follow us. A short distance to the east, there is a fire line that is about to be extinguished. We will bring you there."

After the youth said that, the he gathered his surviving soldiers and formed them into ranks. The chaotic battle situation between the two forces were finally undone, and the sight of the Imperial army made the Kiokian troopers opened their eyes wide.

"Hey, come on, get up! It is finally over…!"

"My eyes… I can't see… Where is everyone…"

"Blood… He is bleeding nonstop…! Anyone have bandages…!?"

The groans of pain formed a symphony. These soldiers entered a close quarter muddied battle with half the numbers of the enemy, so it was a given it would end like this. Some got slashed in the face by the sabres; others got trampled by crazed horses; there were others who couldn't make a sound anymore, lying on the ground like a broken rag. Instead of counting the casualties, it would be quicker to account for the ones who were still safe. Including the heavily wounded, they have lost half their numbers.

"…Vankzyaal*… You insisted on continuing the fight under such circumstances?"

"Did I say that? Why can't I recall?"

When he saw Ikuta pretending to be retarded, Jean was certain that everything earlier was a bluff and the feelings of rage and regret welled up like the tides. However, since the negotiations were over and they had been disarmed, realistically speaking, it would be impossible to start over now."

"Follow us and don't fall behind, we want to focus on helping our wounded quickly too."

"…Syah*, I understand, lead the way."

Ikuta left the wounded and those tending to them, and gathered 40 men from those who could still move. Together with Yatori's cavalry, they set off with less than 80 men. The Kiokians followed right behind, but Jean left command of the unit to Miara, walking alongside Ikuta at the rear of the unit.

"… Can I ask something, First Lieutenant Solork?"

After marching in silence for about 10 minutes, Jean spoke suddenly. Ikuta nodded gently.

"Depending on the contents of the question, I might not be able to answer. But you are free to ask away."

"We sent a detachment to the detour in the west, how is the battle over there?"

In the few seconds after hearing the question, Ikuta considered what information he could divulge.

“They are still in the midst of a fort defensive battle, and we will retreat a few days later just as planned.”

“…Yah*…”

Jean looked as if he was dissatisfied with the amount of information he got, but he didn’t press further. Ikuta realized that Jean wanted to know how the Phantom Unit’s sneak attack fared, but he didn’t have the obligation to tell him the truth. They kept their distance and fell into silence after the conversation ended.

After another 20 minutes, their group left the road and turned left, heading into the forest. It was tough in the beginning because of the poor road conditions, but they reached a place where the vegetation had burned out, and the area lit by unobstructed moonlight made it easier to walk. Before long, the group passed a place that was hot and thick with smoke and arrived at their destination.

“Excellent, as expected, the fire is weak here. I will throw dirt on the fire to put it out, get your men to help too.”

When he heard the request for assistance, Jean wasn’t reluctant, sending his subordinates to take part too. With so many hands at work, the job was done in less than 10 minutes. A temporary gap appeared on the intense wall of fire.

“Alright, hurry on over. Once you have crossed, we will start repairing the fire line.”

Ikuta calmly urged the uninvited guest to leave. The white-haired officer nodded in response, instructing his men to form two lines and pass through the gap. He joined the last batch himself, and headed for the other side of the fire wall.

“Has all your people crossed? Well then, we will start the fire right now.”

After placing the logs that had been prepared ahead of time and splashing oil onto them, the fire troopers lit the fire. Flame burst forth immediately, drawing a scorching barrier between the two forces.

Ikuta thought he had completed all his task, and turned to leave immediately. At this moment, a shout came from the other side of the fire wall:

“— Sydbeah*! Wait! First Lieutenant Solork! What moves you to protect the Empire!”

The youth stopped. He and the white haired officer looked at each other with the blazing flame between them.

“I was born in a small nation called Bayoshi! It was situated to the northeast of the continent in the past, but in a war against its neighbouring country La Oh, both nations fell! After losing all my loved ones in the war, I had nowhere to go as a war orphan! And the one who picked me up was the Kioka Republic!”

"And now, I am a child of Kioka! Be it the ideology of the nation founded on technology, or its ability to maintain a republic governance system despite sharing borders with the Empire, all these are things I am proud of! One day, all nations will be reborned in the template of Kioka! Corrupted governance will be destroyed, selfish ideologies will be silenced in meaningless wars, and the world will prosper, serenaded by the songs of peace! To achieve this goal, I have the obligation of not wasting a single second of my life! I believe that not needing sleep was something bestowed to me by those who passed on in order to achieve this goal!"

Jean said these without hesitation, and looked at his adversary with an intense gaze. In order to learn what his opponent really think.

"But you stopped me from advancing this time! Because of that, the time needed to change the world to the world it should be is delayed! That's why I have to ask— What drives you to defend the Empire!? Do you truly believe that your actions will make the world a better place!?"

It was a frank and young question, but it missed the point so much that it was sad. Ikuta snorted and replied:

"… Unfortunately, from the moment of my birth til now, I have never wanted to protect my country. What I want to protect and sometimes fail to protect are people, not the nation."

"Nyatt! De…Nyatt*! It's the duty of the nation to protect those people! Isn't that why people strive for a better country!? Isn't that so!?"

"… I see. And in order to make and protect such a country, a hero like you will be squashed completely dry and tossed aside right? What an excellent system."

Jean could only show a shocked expression, he completely didn't understand what the other party was saying. Ikuta sensed his confusion, and said with a sigh:

"I think this will just be a waste of my breath, but let me give you some advice— the reason why you work 24 hours without rest isn't because you needed to do so in order to realize your dream, but because the other people are slacking and not doing those things."

"You are not aware of it, but you are more pitiable than a slave. Thinking one-sidedly that you have the obligations to do this, and not realizing til the very end that someone pushed this onto you. Since you are working hard in the wrong way, everyone around you will be lazing in the wrong way. Like a giant trying to hold the whole world on his shoulder. "

"Let me share a quote with you, Insomaniac Brilliant General— All heroes dies of overwork."

"…Hazgaze* (What nonsense)!"

Jean yelled at the back of the leaving figure as if he was trying to wound him. His silvery eyes were gleaming with hatred, this was the first time in his life that he felt such feelings toward a single person.

Although Ikuta's company triumphed over the despairingly huge tactical disadvantage, but the price they paid was the lives of over 60 men. And this number was increasing as the breathing of some of the heavily wounded stopped forever.

Of the 122 people mobilized, only 41 fared better than light wounds, and none was unscathed. The numbers accurately reflected how terrible the battle they fought was. And as the commander, Ikuta felt deeper shame than anyone else over this fact.

After collecting their wounded, they gathered their comrades who fled were asked to flee for the hills, and continued the maintenance of the fire line. After that, only two small skirmishes occurred before the deadline, which was a small bit of fortune for the group. But during this time, more of the heavily wounded lying in the tents behind them took their last breaths.

"You have done well, we have defended this place to the last moment — We will start retreating right now."

On the 8th night after the line of fire defence plan commenced, Ikuta announced to his subordinate who was standing in formation before him. The soldiers who were falling in tears held onto each other, and the group started hiking up the mountains. They needed to walk for a day to reach the base behind and hand over their duties, and two more heavily wounded died halfway through their trek. Ikuta had a high fever because of an infection in his little finger's wound. The few times he fell, he was supported by Nanak or Suya.

At the same time, Captain Sazaruf and Torway's unit in the western fort, as well as Matthew and Haro's unit in the center region defended their zones successfully, and has started withdrawing. Ikuta also received these news via light signal before they set off, which gave the exhausted soldiers who had to scale the mountains a strong sense of hope. They want to meet up with their comrades and return safely— with this thought in mind, the troop urged their feet to move on.

"It will take about another hour. Ikuta, you can lean on me more."

"Ah… Yes… Thank you, Nana…"

Ikuta couldn't walk on his own any longer, and had to rely on the shoulder of his comrades. However, nanak refused to relinquish this task. However, Ikuta would have to adopt a tedious posture if the petite Nanak supported him alone, so the other side was supported by his deputy Suya and the other male soldiers who took turns. When Yatori wanted to take up this task, Nanak would intimidate her with a strong tone.

"Don't come here, red one! Go take care of the horses!"

"… Sigh, she absolutely hates me."

The evening when they were about to reach their destination, the same conversation occurred. Yatori left with a sigh— But the moment Nanak stuck her tongue out at Yatori's back, a shadow landed quietly in front of Nanak.

“— What! You… You are— ”

Before Nanak could react, that shadow already sent her flying with a kick. Suya who was supporting the other shoulder also fell from the impact. As for Ikuta who was in a daze because of his high fever, he fell on his butt defenceless.

“… Nobody moves.”

Yatori who noticed the sudden change attempted to rush back, but the cold voice restrained her movement. A small blade was being held to Ikuta’s throat.

“You are from the Phantom Unit…!”

Yatori gritted her teeth, frustrated that she let down her guard as she glared at the enemy— He didn’t need to disguise as a Shinnack anymore, and was dressed differently from their first meeting, wearing black clothes with a belt. Half of his face was still covered, but Yatori was certain who this man was from the air about him.

“I assume you must be the head of the Phantoms— This should be our second meeting.”

“……”

“This might sound like pouring cold water over your determination, but we have already completed our mission and is withdrawing. We just need to hand over to our comrades, and we can retreat back to the northern stronghold. Don’t you think you have lost sight of your objective if you are attacking us now?”

The shadow kept his blade on Ikuta who was lying at his feet, and at the same time, removed the mask covering his lower face with the other hand. The face that was revealed was surprisingly young, and could be described as youthful and competent looking.

“— I am Nirva Gin, born from western Arbonik, senchi Martial House— descendent of the Gin family.”

Yatori opened her eyes wide. Who would expect a Phantom to announce his origin so openly?

“The Phantoms are dead, killed by you all. The man here isn’t the head of the Phantom Unit, but just a warrior.”

Sovereign of Arbonik. About one hundred years ago, Captain blah who was revered as a hero by future generations took part in a Imperial campaign that destroyed a feudal nation in the far east. In that nation were several lords known as ‘Damyo’ who governed by their unique culture by relying on competent warriors with absolute loyalty.

It was originally annexed as a territory of the Empire after the nation fell, but became a province of the Kioka Republic after a strange twist of events, and the citizens and culture gradually melded into the Kioka way of life… However, the concept of taking pride in one’s origin didn’t fade. Even now,

people from Arbonik would still call themselves the descendants of a certain Martial House.

“I crossed blades with you, your style is ‘dual swords’, and worthy of the name ‘unrivaled swords’— You are the inheritor of Igsem, are you not?”

“Yes. I am Yatorishino Igsem, an Igsem armed with dual blades.”

Yatori replied with her name, and Nirva announced to her with a firm nod of the head:

“I want a duel— I am here to take the title of the ‘strongest’.”

Pure fighting spirit was overflowing from his body, and Yatori faced him fearlessly.

“I accept— But let your hostage go before we duel. Don’t worry, an Igsem will not back down from a challenge. Your actions is just tarnishing the reputation of a warrior.”

When Nirva heard her guarantee, he treated it as a promise between warriors. Although the blade had been moved away from Ikuta’s throat, he was too weak to move because of his high fever, despite being liberated.

“Someone take Ikuta away, everyone else back away too.”

On Yatori’s command, the troops pulled back like a subsiding tide. Ikuta was also dragged from the scene, but one person stayed. It was Nanak who got kicked in the stomach earlier, she remained in the attack range of the both of them with one hand nursing her abdomen.

“… Wait! Don’t just talk between yourselves! I have a bone to pick with this fellow too!”

The chief of the Shinnack looked at Nirva with sharp eyes, and said:

“It’s been a long time, boss of the shadows. Although you all had stopped acting on the surface right before war broke out.”

“Because we accomplished our mission of inciting you to start a civil war. If you want to live longer, then back off, little girl of the Shinnack. The Phantoms are dead, and the person acting and directing this role no longer exist.”

Nirva probably had no intention of provoking her. But Nanak drew her weapons, she had more than adequate reason to do so.

“We didn’t think we were cheated. From the very beginning, we know you were people sent by the Kiokas. Mobilizing the tribe to revolt against the Empire is the will of our people anyways— However, I cannot forgive you for sending the Alderamin Holy Army and desecrating the Grand Arfatra Mountains with their feet!”

“I told you to back down, so what if you can’t forgive this?”

“This is what I will do of course!”

Nanak who held blades in both hands charged forth. Nirva changed his grip on his short sword to a normal hold, ready to engage. However, right before the two parties enter melee range, Yatori intruded in and grabbed the arm wielding the Gauche.

“—Huh— ?”

When Nanak realized her vision had turned one round, her body already hit the ground.

Yatori held Nanak who lost her conscious gently, and passed her to another comrade.

“Sigh… She will hates me more when she wakes up.”

“Just leave her be.”

Nirva who had readied his blade but had nowhere to use it said. After handing Nanak to a comrade and returning, Yatori shook her head with a serious expression.

“She is my comrade, I can’t just let her die… on top of that, you are the opponent, someone already died to your hands.”

Yatori bit her lips when she remembered Deinkun’s brilliant smile, and faced the enemy once again.

“Well then, even though I want to start right now— But the weapon a Arbonik warrior is proficient in isn’t a dagger right?”

When he heard this accusation, Nirva who was expressionless as if he was wearing a mask raised the corner of his lips.

“Of course.”

He tossed the dagger aside and reached both hands behind his black shirt. When he pulled out his hands, two kodachis in black sheaths appeared in his hands, both of them two feet in length.

“That’s the way it should be.”

When she saw the slightly curved single edged blade emerged from the sheath, Yatori trembled in excitement, one of the few rare times she did in her life— it was an Arbonik katana. With a soft steel core and hard steel exterior, the double layered structure provide frightening balance of sharpness and toughness, an artistic masterpiece of a blade. Anyone who pursuing the path of the sword would want to hold it at least once, this was one of the best weapon in the world.

“I would like to show my deepest respect to the craftsmanship of your forebears. The blade used by the Igsem are forged with reference to your weapon.”

“This is a weapon that had been passed down for nine generations. It was handed down to my hands

today to claim your life.”

Considering the Igsem’s history of being the strongest, it was clear that these words were not an exaggeration. In the face of the killing intent passed down through the generations, Yatori treated it as if she was tasting aged fine wine.

“… Hey! Yatori…”

When their fighting spirit reached their peaks, the moment the vermillion haired girl reached for the hilt of her swords, she heard a weak voice that would make one disheartened. Two set of gaze fell on the source.

“… Wake me up when the fight ends…”

After saying that while leaning onto the tree, Ikuta closed his eyes and turned silent. His interjection was more inconsiderate than usual, Yatori understood that this was proof that he trusted her. For this youth, fortune was something that would come sooner or later if he just laid there.

“Being treated like an alarm clock— Can you ignore such humiliation?”

Yatori taunted childishly, which was rare for her. She did this out of consideration for her opponent, to help reignite his spirit. As she intended, the aggravated Nirva raised the kodaichi in either hands into middle guard and high guard position.



“— Draw your swords, I will end the claim by the Igsem of being the strongest.”

“Many warriors said the same thing. I think it is unsightly as their last words, but it seem things are different this time.”

Yatori drew the weapons on her waist, and adopted the stance of sabre in right hand and short sword in her left naturally. Her expression didn’t have any excess confidence, her hands on the hilts didn’t exert and strength, showing no gaps on her body.

“Be proud of the sight before you, warrior of Arbonik. It is the fundamentals for Igsems to use one blade against a single opponent— However, I acknowledge that you are an exception.”

The figure of her raising her dual blades showed her majestic will— I will answer your challenge with all my might.

“En Garde!”

The moment he announced the start of the fight, Nirva pushed off the ground. At the instant he stepped into Yatori's attack range, their weapons clashed in a series of dazzling blows.

The first strike. In response to the thrust at her face, Yatori pushed her sabre close to her enemy's blade and thrust forward. It was a near perfect cross counter, it didn't have any effect as Nirva lowered his stance before hand since he predicted this. At that instant when the two blades clashed, the focus switched to the short sword in the left hand and the kodachi on the right hand.

Nirva had the advantage in weapon reach, but the guard at the hilt favoured Yatori. Under such circumstances, the best tactic wasn't to strike preemptively, but to counter the enemy. The vermillion haired swordsman made this judgement immediately and waited 0.1 second. She wasn't tricked by the first two feints, and used her guard to ward off the real blow.

"Fu…!"

Nirva's attack was completely defended, but he refused to retreat. The moment his skin was grazed by the hilt guard, he lowered his body to evade the thrust, and closed in right into his opponent with a stance so low his knees almost touched the ground. He then slashed the kodachi in his left hand at her thigh after shaking off the sabre. But Yatori got even closer in and delivered a full powered knee into Nirva's face.

Even though Nirva used his right arm as a shield to avoid a direct hit to his face, his body was still forced back from the impact. Before his knees even straightened and his stance unsteady, Yatori followed up with an attack mercilessly. Nirva crossed his kodachi to block the sabre slashing top down with the aid of gravity.

But this wasn't just a simple move to block. The moment his dual blade blocked the sabre, he withstood the force with the horizontal blade and pushed forth with the vertical one, diverting the path of the sabre splendidly. At the same moment he parried the attack, his free right arm slashed horizontally, blocking the short sword that was coming at the nick of time. For an instant, a gap appeared between the parried sabre and himself.

Nirva didn't hesitate kicking at his adversary's face with his left leg. It wouldn't end with just a broken nose if the strike connected. Yatori slid her body to the right where her sabre was swung earlier to dodge. She pulled the short sword in her left hand across Nirva's ankle, but she didn't feel the sensation of cutting flesh, only the feedback of hitting steel reverberate in her hand.

"Hah…!" "Fu— "

After several changes without taking breathes, the two of them pulled apart again. Yatori glanced at the left ankle of her enemy that she hit, and couldn't help sighing.

"Not only is your feet unruly, you are well prepared too. Is that some sort of greave?"

"One of the House teachings of Gin is 'Control thy sword with thy hands, manipulate it nimbly with thy legs'. So steel plates to protect one's achilles are an obvious choice of armour. And you don't

have the rights to accuse my legs of being unruly."

Was his glib of the tongue which was completely unlike how he was as the head of the Phantom an expression of how excited and tense he was? No, there was joy mixed in too. The faint smile on Nirva's lips was proof.

"But you are strong… You are more unreasonable than I imagined. How did you keep dodging sword techniques you saw for the first time?"

"The concept of swordsmanship had been around for over a thousand years since ancient times, you think truly new sword techniques will appear so easy? No matter how marvelous a sword technique is, it is something that will naturally evolve from the truth of the sword. It might be impressive, but never surprising."

When he heard Yatori said that unhesitantly, Nirva smiled stiffly, thinking that this must be the confidence of the strongest? For the Igsems, even amazing sword techniques that took generations of hardship to develop was just fundamental knowledge in the first textbook on the theory of swords.

"Let me make this clear first, you can't defeat me with sword techniques. If you want to pull the Igsems off the throne of the strongest, then let me see a higher level of performance."

The crimsom haired-swordswoman pointed her point of her sabre to her enemy and declared. Nirva's smile deepened after he heard that.

"I am planning on doing that— "

After he said that boldly, Nirva regulated his breathing, and re-gripped his two swords with the points of the blade drooping slightly. Yatori who noticed the change in atmosphere put on a stern expression. Nirva's stance was completely different from the one earlier that was filled with battle intent. Right now, he had a natural posture without a bit of strength in his body.

"… You want me to attack in any way I wish? That is interesting."

Unlike earlier, Yatori adopted an offensive stance this time. She turned the side of her body towards the enemy, and raised the sabre in her right hand to the middle guard position. She intended to take full advantage of her freedom to control the distance between them, and cut off the palm of her opponent who was on the defensive.

Different from the intense clash in the first round, a breathtaking exchange already took place while they were closing in. Facing Yatori who was coming at him with her blade, Nirva maintained his natural stance. He was unnaturally calm. Even though Yatori was entering a range where she would be able to attack one sidedly

"…Tsh…Fuu…"

Yatori felt a faint sense of dissonance and slowed her pace. Although she didn't understand why, something was definitely wrong. Like barging into a different room that looked really similar to your

own chambers, or putting on your clothes backwards by accident, it was a vague sensation that couldn't be described in words.

She couldn't tell right away what that feeling was, but for Yatori, this was something that she looked forward to. As she enjoyed the tension of facing something unknown, she urged her feet to speed up again.

"…Tsh …Fuu… Tsh…"

Time passed as slowly and heavily as a snail. But it was definitely passing, and the instance when stillness turn to movement was upon them. Just a few more centimeters, when Yatori's feet close in just a bit more, she will be in slashing range.

"…Tsh, Fuu, Tsh, Fuu, Tsh…"

Her toes entered the boundary and the chance to take the initiative by attacking first came. But right before Yatori thrust the sabre in her right hand forth, the moment when her muscles were committed to the movement and there was no time to change her momentum, she noticed the reason for the feeling of dissonance— her opponent's breathing had sync with hers!

At the exact same moment of her thrust, with a timing that couldn't have been possible if he was reacting to visual cues, Nirva took a step forward with his right leg, throwing his body sideways to dodge. He didn't care about the blade glancing across his chest, his kodachi that was slumping weakly was injected with strength in an instant, and thrust straight for his enemy's throat.

"— Ugh!"

The feedback from the blade told him he cut into skin and flesh. When he realized it wasn't deep enough to hit the artery or bone, Nirva leapt back without hesitation. The next instant, a sabre flashed across where he was earlier.

"Even this move is…!"

After pulling some distance away, Nirva's first words expressed his fear. The Igsem swordswoman before him had a shallow wound on her neck, but made no effort to hide how impressed she was.

"… Getting into the same rhythm and seeing through my tells… No, you saw through the aura before my tells right?"

She talked about something that was very abstract, but the warrior before her understood the meaning behind it and smiled.

"Mirror Break— This is the final answer my clan arrived at. This is what you requested, a higher level of performance, beyond sword techniques."

After saying his piece, Nirva reverted to his earlier stance. With the feeling of goosebumps breaking out all over her body, Yatori gripped her weapons, thinking back on the struck that brushed pass her

neck.

Mirror Break— as seen earlier, this was a type of counter attack. However, this technique was on a different level from reading and reacting to the enemy's move. If he didn't know when the enemy will move, it would be impossible to grasp the timing where the line between attacking and counterattacking collapses.

Then, what was the key to realizing this attack that was literally predicting the future? If observation powers honed by plentiful experiences was a precondition, then the most important factor would be breathing? For example, the timing of inhaling, exhaling and holding one's breath. Observe them and think of them as preparatory actions. Taken to the extreme, by grasping the breathing of the opponent, it might be possible to understand what their next move would be. It was just a crude deduction, but Nirva's movement just now should be such a technique.

"… I must say, that was amazing. If I realize it any later, I would have died."

"This ultimate technique isn't a surprise attack that can take down an opponent in one go. Come at me, I will finish you off the next time."

Contrary to his declaration to decide the match, Nirva looked at Yatori with a very clear expression. That was expected, a counter attack that relied on syncing with your enemy couldn't be done if he had impure emotions such as killing intent. His state of mind right now was like still water.

Without doubt, this was the realm of an expert. The murderous move born out of the stubborn will of a clan to become the strongest, and the final solution they concluded in their search to be the strongest. Yatori felt she was being treated by the hospitality of clan Gin that span hundreds of years, and was grateful and happy about it.

"— Well then, I will use the technique of the Igsem in response to the technique of the Gin Clan."

After announcing that, Yatori turned her body sideways towards the enemy once more and raised her blades. She was not permitted to fall into an unsightly impasse because she couldn't attack effectively. Using the ultimate offensive technique against the ultimate defensive technique was the etiquette of the strongest.

"— Phew～～…"

Yatori cleared her mind and prepared to use her ultimate skill, and glanced at the black hair youth lying outside the battle zone— She smiled wryly when she saw his figure, thinking that it would just be a waste of effort to worry about her hands failing to let go off her blades.

"… Heart banishment and boundary rend…"

One step, she closed the distance. Followed by a large stride, then another. It wouldn't be wrong to call this brutish. Because she wasn't thinking about anything as a human.

"And transform into a simple pair of swords— "

Their attack range overlap and their sword flashes. Nirva who could see through any premeditation planned to adapt to Yatori's attack, but realized immediately that didn't work and switched to the defensive. The collision of steel resulted in sparks— with this as the cue, Igsem's time started.

Diagonal slash from the shoulder, horizontal sweep, a targeted strike at the opponent's wrist, a cut from low to high— There was no gaps between the consecutive attacks, making Nirva feel as if he was being assailed continuously by a waterfall. He couldn't find any opening to counter. While his body was still wavering from the impact of one blow, the next one was already coming. Aside from gritting his teeth and enduring it, what else could he do?

The thoughts of using the ultimate technique of his martial clan— "Mirror Break" to engage her was shattered from the very first blow— Even if he wanted to synchronize with the enemy's breathing, his opponent wasn't breathing. No, that wouldn't be a problem. Aside from breathing, there was other ways to see through the premeditation of the opponent; If necessary, he would switch to defence, and act after the negative effect of not breathing appears— However, that wasn't the case. What was happening before Nirva was beyond such a level.

— No strength! No premeditation! Only action is left in this woman's body!

Nirva sought to survive in the fierce tide created by the blades, and shivered because of the abnormal situation— In a way, his "Mirror Break" was a technique that predicted the enemy's thoughts and countering them. Because the opponent attack this way, so I will respond that way, attack another way and I will defend some other way, countering the opponent's moves. By putting oneself in the position of the enemy, he could replicate their thoughts, which was why the "Mirror Break" was a certain kill technique.

However, the sword of the foe before him didn't contain any thoughts for him to replicate. It was an instinctive type of combination attack, as if the human wielding the swords was gone, and only the blades remain. As he endured the assault, Nirva realized— this was a type of 'standard pattern'. She didn't plan her next attack after seeing how her opponent reacted, but chained her attack by considering beforehand what sort of defensive move her opponent would make, forming a standard pattern. To be frank, she wasn't really paying attention to how the enemy was reacting.

Even her breathing was arranged to be part of her chain attack. There was no meaning in seeing through it, as there was nothing to it other than supplying her with oxygen. For the swordsman of Igsem, even the most superficial thinking was just noises that should be purged. In other words, the answer the Gin clan arrived at was meaningless for this opponent alone.

"Woah… Woah… Warrrgghh…!"

Fear, admiration and despair were transformed into a scream and expelled from the mouth of the warrior. His numb arms reminded him that his defenses were reaching their limits. In that instant, numerous scenes flashed across his mind and disappeared. His cold sister who looked like him; the innocent smile of the white-haired officer; the first day he raised his kodachi blade proudly—

An intense gust of steel severed all that.

The two Kodachi fell onto the ground with a crisp sound. An instant later, blood gushed out from Nirva's mouth. Pain caught up next, but he wasn't permitted to fall onto his knees. Because the blade of the sabre pierced his chest right out of his back, and his opponent right in front of him was holding him up from below.

"— After countless attempts with the dual blade style, this is 'the unthinking sword'. This is Igsem's answer."

With a distance where they could feel each other's breathe, Yatori said to the warrior she defeated:

"I feel that this should be my victory— But what about you? Do you have any regrets about not being able to challenge me in your best condition?"

When he heard such considerate words, Nirva felt the sincerity of the other party and was impressed — During the counter attack when the sneak attack on the western fort failed, a bullet hit the side of his abdomen. It wasn't prominent because of his black attire, but the wound had been bleeding all this while. It was a serious injury that damaged the organs, and it was clear from the wound and blood loss that death was awaiting him.

That was why Nirva came here. To seek the end of as a warrior, a battlefield suitable for a warrior to die. He wish to not die as a nameless phantom, but a swordsman who aimed to challenge the strongest. The vermillion haired girl realized his feelings before the fight began—

"… I have no regrets, I did my very best."

Yatori listened carefully and acknowledge the answer with a nod.

"… Is that so. This duel is to avenge Warrant Officer Deinkun Hargunska too. If you think I had won fairly, I will report this to his grave one day."

Nirva didn't need to nod in response. For a warrior who accepted defeat, there was nothing else for him to say.

"Farewell, Nirva Gin. Warrior of the honourable Arbonik— Please take the fact that your swordsmanship made an Igsem swordsman feel fear to your grave, in place of the title of the strongest."

The moment she finished her eulogy, Yatori pulled out the sabre she stabbed into her opponent. This action removed the plug stopping the bleeding and blood gushed out. Nirva's body lost its support, and he slowly collapsed in a pool of blood.

As the soldiers around them watched silently, Yatori who was drenched in the fresh blood of her enemy walked towards her old friend who was lying down on the tree root. Even though the youth should be sleeping soundly, he looked as if he had fainted with how pale his face looked. But the flame haired girl woke him unceremoniously.

"— It's over. Hurry and get up, Ikuta."

"…… Ugh…"

Although he heard the firm voice that woke him, Ikuta couldn't muster the strength to stand and opened his eyes while lying down. He glanced to the sight and confirmed Yatori's figure that had been dyed red with blood and with blades in both hands— A gentle smile appeared on his lips.

"Fuwah… Morning Yatori. You are exceptionally red again today, just the right shade to wake someone up."

The first thing he said was this sort of jokes again. Yatori moved her hands with a wry smile, sheathing her sabre and dagger away. When she performed this series of actions, she let go of the hilt very naturally.

Epilogue

Four months and two weeks after the sudden unrest in the northern stronghold. Princess Chamille who had to relocate because of the deterioration of the situation arrived at the Fourth Army base that was to the north of central Empire. She understood better than anyone else how spending her days as if they were years felt like.

She stayed alone in the room assigned to her, holding her knees as she sat on the bed. She was only willing to accept sure a painful and free status, because she had done all that she could.

The Princess made the best arrangement with all the connections she had. She ordered in the name of the royal family to the Northern Stronghold that once their duties were completed, the members of the knight band were to retreat… However, could this order really be relayed to Ikuta's group at the very front lines? Would the schemes of someone who wanted to leave them for dead cause the order to be overlooked— When she thought about these possibilities, she couldn't help feeling uneasy.

"— Sorry for the intrusion, Princess Chamille!"

Just when the princess was about to be crushed mentally, a knocking and a voice at the voice could be heard throughout the room. It wasn't time for meals yet— the girl held on to this fact for support, and placed her hope on the report that would follow.

"The soldiers had returned from the north! If you would like to, we can arrange an audience— Ughh!"

Princess Chamille jumped towards the entrance before the soldier finished, not realizing that she made an innocent soldier bleed from the nose as she dashed for the corridor. The guards at the entrance ran after her in surprised, and all the soldiers he passed stared at her curiously, but nothing drew the attention of the Princess. She continued running even though she stumbled several times, and finally reached outside from the main door.

"Huff… Huff… Puff— ! The knights… Where are the knights members…?"

The Princess looked around with bloodshot eyes, and spotted a group of soldiers who apparently just returned one hundred meters away. She started running towards that group. As she drew near, the soldiers noticed her and cast surprised gazes at her.

"Solork! Yatori! Torway, Matthew, Haro…! I am here! Answer me if you hear me…!"

Her scream was on the verge of being hysterical, and the one who appeared after hearing her was Yatorishino Igsem who had the reputation of being deeply loyal. Making her way through the troops, she sprinted in the shortest path to hold the petite body that was breathing raggedly and on the verge of falling.

"— Apologies for paying my tribute so late. I am back, Princess Charmille."

“Ah… Yatori, I’m so glad that you are okay…! But… But, what about the others?”

She became franctic because of repeatedly thinking about the worst. The faces the princess had waited so anxiously for appeared. Torway got on his knee and bowed formally, Matthew and Haro mimicked him and lowered their heads.

“Sorry for making you worry, Your Highness.”

“Ohh, Torway, Matthew and Haro…! Please get up, and let me see your faces… ah… it was a really arduous war, everyone had gotten thinner…”

After the Princess glanced at the three person and said that, she raised her head sharply again.

“And Solork…? Where is Solork?”

“Oh, yes yes yes. I am here Princess, don’t need to yell.”

At this moment, a laid back voice sounded out and a black haired youth appear amongst the soldiers — something broke inside the Princess’ heart the moment she saw that face. She didn’t even notice the Shinnack girl who appeared right next to Ikuta, and jumped into Ikuta’s arms without saying a word.

As Ikuta just recovered from his illness, his legs lacked strength. After receiving the princess’ hug that was equivalent to a collision, he fell onto his butt without any resistance. However, the one hugging him didn’t care about that.

“… Solork…! Solork… Solork… Solork…!”

Princess Chamille hugged the body before her tightly, and called out his name in a daze. But Ikuta who was hit in the chest had difficulty breathing, and couldn’t react at all.

“Who… Who are you! Get away from Ikuta— Ugh!”

When she saw Nanak starting to protest on reflex, Yatori locked her arms from behind to stop her. The girl who was a loyal subject sealed Nanak’s mouth and her curses, and sighed at the same time.

“Back down, I won’t let you disturb them… And why does such tasks that would make you detest me always fall onto me?”

“Umh—! Ugh—! Ughhh— !”

Yatori continued to restrain the struggling Nanak and left the scene nonchalantly. The Princess didn’t realized something else was happening, and continued to hug Ikuta.

“Thank goodness you are alright… Thank goodness…!”

“… I almost died just now, isn’t it too much to ram into me the moment we meet?”

Ikuta said with a nonchalant face, grabbed the Princess' shoulders and pushed her away. These series of movements made Princess Charmille realized the youth was missing a finger on his left hand.

"…Your …What happened to your little finger…! What happened? Did you lose it in the war?"

"Hmm?… Oh, no no, because of a certain circumstances, it was cut into three parts and gifted to a girl — That's not important Princess, calm down and look around you. We are not the only ones you need to welcome back, right."

His advice pierced into her ears, and the Princess suddenly appraised her surrounding. She then realized— losing one little finger isn't much, compared to the time when they set off for the Northern Stronghold, the number of soldiers in all returning units had an obvious decrease. How many lives were lost in the long campaign? Few of the survivors were unscathed, and there were many who could only stand because their brethrens loan them a shoulder.

"… My apologies, I showed such a shameful appearance to the group of greatest contributors."

Realizing her mistake, the Princess let go of Ikuta, stood up and lowered her head sincerely to the injured and exhausted returning soldiers.

"— Everyone have shown incredible valor. It is thanks to your actions that we held on to the Northern Stronghold and defended the Holy Aldera army invasion— I offer my thanks for your hard work, and my condolences for those who fell in battle. In the name of the royal Katjvanmaninik family, I swear that you will be rewarded for your efforts adequately."

The Princess looked the soldiers in the eye and saluted. The next moment, the troops also returned the salute. Many of them was smiling faintly as they looked at Princess Chamille. They had many opportunities to approach this girl from the royal family during their normal course of duty, but they still think of her as a respectable and beloved Princess.

"…Ah— Erm, is it okay for me to come out now…?"

As the air became tense once again, Captain Sazaruf failed to grasp the right timing to show himself, and poked Torway's back from behind the soldiers. Ikuta noticed Sazaruf, got up and dust himself off, then cleared his throat.

"Erhem!— Ah! Princess, this might be sudden, but I have something important to report. Don't hide in that corner Captain, get over here."

Princess Chamille turned her head back in surprise, and noticed an officer she had some met before. It had been four months since their last meeting, but his name flashed across her mind immediately.

"Isn't this First Lieutenant Senpa·Sazaruf? It's been a while, pardon me. You became a Captain in the short time we were apart."

"I… I… should be the one who felt honour by meeting you again!"

Seeing Captain Sazaruf speaking in a messy way due to nervousness, Princess Chamille tilted her head puzzled.

"— However, the Captain is assigned to the northern stronghold right? It is strange for him to return to central with Solork and the others…"

"I am the one who brought him here, Princess. And do complement the Captain more, as the man before who was undoubtedly the person who accomplished the most in this war."

Ikuta said in a pretentious tone. He then turned to the baffled princess and explained:

"The Holy Aldera army that invaded from the north numbered more than 10,000. Our forces that stayed in the front lines to facilitate our army's withdrawal was just a battalion of 600. Despite our orders to stop the enemy's advance with such a small number of men, there was one man who didn't give up. As the soldiers thought it was unreasonable and was consumed by despair, the one who led us to the light— Is this man!"

Ikuta pointed at Captain Sazaruf in an exaggerated way. The subject glared back as if he was saying 'what nonsense is this fellow saying!?' Ikuta ignored him elegantly, and concluded his introduction:

"He is our reliable superior officer, Senpa who is beloved by everyone,,Captain Sazaruf— How can we leave such a talented person at the borders with such a low rank!? He should come to central as soon as possible! And so, Your Highness, can you give your recommendations alongside us?"

With all those listening dumbfounded, only Ikuta was filled with life like a fish that got into water. Captain Sazaruf watched the youth making his speech with a stiff expression, and noticed— Did I just got caught in an incredible situation?